

FROM CUBO-FUTURISM TO THE LEFT FRONT :
MAYAKOVSKII AND LEFT ART, 1917-1923

Francis Williams

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil
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Submitted for the degree of ^{M. Phil} ~~Ph.D.~~
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FROM CUBO-FUTURISM TO THE LEFT FRONT:

MAYAKOVSKII AND LEFT ART: 1917-1923.

ABSTRACT

In the late nineteen sixties and early seventies there was a marked upsurge of interest among Western scholars in the Soviet literary and artistic avant-garde of the nineteen twenties. The most prominent and active of Soviet avant-garde groupings was the Left Front of the Arts (Lef), led by the poet Vladimir Mayakovskii. Under his leadership, and also under the guidance of Mayakovskii's close friend, the theoretician Osip Brik, Lef stood for social commitment and called for the destruction of art.

Left Front anti-art ideology stemmed from the aesthetic of pre-revolutionary cubo-futurism, a movement which had stressed experiment for its own sake and the autonomy of the artistic word. This study attempts to show the process of transformation of cubo-futurist ideas, in particular by examining Mayakovskii's works and his activities from the February revolution in 1917 to the launching of the magazine LEF in 1923.

Mayakovskii willingly placed his pen at the service of the revolution. He also believed fervently that only through the experimentalism of the avant-garde could truly revolutionary art be created in Soviet Russia. And so Mayakovskii came to play a leading role in the avant-garde, the so-called 'left' artists, both as a writer and as a propagandist and organiser.

Only slightly less important was the part played

by Osip Brik whose theories firstly of 'art as device' and subsequently of the 'social command' were to have a great impact on the development of Mayakovskii's verse.

For almost three years after the October revolution of 1917, the 'left' artists were able, *faut de mieux*, to occupy leading positions in the country's artistic life. Initially experimentalism was equated with the revolutionary in art. Brik, however, was to go further, looking to a connection of art ^{with} (to) productive forces, to the creation of a new industrial aesthetic.

by/ The 'left' expended much energy laying claim to the title of proletarian art. Such claims were vigorously resisted both organisations such as the Proletkul't and by the Party. By the end of 1920 the power of the 'left' had been effectively broken. In his efforts to get his own work published Mayakovskii, too, fell victim to official displeasure.

Mayakovskii's verse of this period shows very clearly the influence of the ideas developed by Brik. This is clear from the programmatic poems, as also from the themes and form of his agitational verse. In these last, Mayakovskii expressed his commitment to the Soviet regime, but in many of the lyrical pieces written at this time the signs of deep inner doubts are unmistakeable.

Similar developments to those taking place in Moscow were to be found in the Far East, where a group of futurists called 'Tvorchestvo' strove to put the new art forms at the service of the revolution.

When the members of this group made their way back to Moscow late in 1921, they joined forces with Mayakovskii and the remnants of the pre-revolutionary cubo-futurist movement, which had also been dispersed by the revolution and the civil war.

Mayakovskii now hoped to lead a movement which would finally demonstrate the necessity for formally revolutionary art in a revolutionary society; art that would seek to work directly on the masses and their environment. He was to be disappointed.

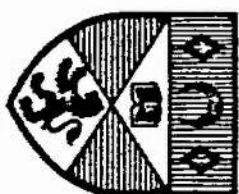
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On the recommendation of the Examining Committee and of the Council of the Faculty of Arts, the Senatus Academicus agreed at its meeting on 15th May, 1981, to award the degree of M.Phil. to Francis Williams for a thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D. entitled "From Cubo-Futurism to the Left Front: Mayakovskii and Left Art 1917-23".

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SUPERVISOR'S CERTIFICATE

I certify that Mr. Francis E.K. Williams has fulfilled the conditions laid down in the Ordinance General No.12 and Resolution of the University Court, 1967, No.1, of the University of St. Andrews, and that he is accordingly qualified to submit this thesis for the degree of ~~Doctor of Philosophy~~. *M. Phil.*

C.J. Barnes

I hereby declare that the following dissertation, except where specifically stated, embodies the results of my own independent research work. All sources are acknowledged in the footnotes and bibliography. No part of this work has been submitted for a degree or diploma at this or any other university, nor is it being submitted concurrently for any such degree.

27th. September, 1980.

I began work on this dissertation in October 1973 at the Department of Russian of the University of St. Andrews. From that date until January 1977, when the scholarship I received from the University expired, I was able to work full-time on writing and research. At that time, the first draft was largely complete, with the exception of a final chapter. From January 1977 onwards, I have been able to work on the dissertation only part-time. Since April 1977 I have been employed by the External Services of the BBC, first as a Programme Assistant and subsequently as Senior Programme Assistant. My duties at the BBC have left me with little time to complete the research I envisaged necessary in order to write the final chapter as planned. Accordingly, the dissertation as submitted represents the results of the research I was able to complete while a full-time postgraduate student at the University of St. Andrews.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	Page 1
I REVOLUTION	Page 8
II IMO AND ISKUSSTVO KOMMUNY	Page 26
III FUTURISM AND ITS IDEOLOGICAL OPPONENTS	Page 57
IV THE DEATH OF EASEL ART	Page 76
V ART AND COMMITMENT: AGITPROP 1919-1921	Page 86
VI THE STRUGGLE WITHIN INKhUK	Page 118
VII TVORCHESTVO	Page 130
VIII MAF TO LEF	Page 175
EPILOGUE	Page 217
BIBLIOGRAPHY	Page 231

INTRODUCTION

The complexity of my generation's biography lies in the fact that we believed unreservedly that the world revolution was coming, ... that the world already belonged to us, while our older comrades - Mayakovskii, Pasternak, Khlebnikov, Malevich, Tatlin, Meierkhol'd - were engaged on a most important task: they were creating a new, unprecedented art for a new life, unprecedented on this earth.¹

Ever since Stalin made his famous pronouncement about Mayakovskii as the "best and most talented poet of our Soviet epoch",² a steady flood of articles, critical studies and memoirs has issued from Soviet presses describing every conceivable aspect, it might seem, of Mayakovskii's activities. There has, however, been one major and consistent omission in Soviet accounts of Mayakovskii's life and work. The requirements of Party doctrine have demanded that cubo-futurism in its original, pre-revolutionary form be treated as a product of the disintegrating bourgeois order.

1. Rita Wright-Kovaleva, "Mayakovsky and Pasternak: Fragments of Reminiscence", Oxford Slavonic Papers, vol. XIII, 1967, p.127.
2. This remark, which may be said to have had unfortunate consequences for the poet's reputation among readers in the Soviet Union, was displayed prominently as the epigraph to the 1936 edition of Mayakovskii's collected works, edited by Lilya Brik.

Futurism in its post-revolutionary guise, striving as it did to promote formal experiment as the prerequisite for poetry and the visual arts in the revolutionary proletarian state, found no more favour at the centres of political power. Eagerly filling the vacuum left by the collapse of the tsarist artistic Establishment after October 1917, the futurists were slapped down by Lenin as early as 1920. Ever since, all manifestations of futurist artistic ideology have been described by the orthodox and Party-minded as 'mistaken'.

Of course, Mayakovskii has to be accommodated and is so, some over-simplification permitting, by isolating Mayakovskii from his friends and colleagues within the literary and artistic avant-garde, with whom he worked in close collaboration. The most notable example was the critic and theoretician Osip Maksimovich Brik. Mayakovskii described his first meeting with Brik and his wife Lilya in 1915 as a 'most joyful date', and, though it became strained, the friendship between them was to last until the poet's suicide in 1930. Mayakovskii became Lilya's lover, and Brik Mayakovskii's closest literary associate and greatest influence, this latter a fact that Soviet critics, beginning with the People's Commissar for Enlightenment Lunacharskii, have consistently deplored. Mayakovskii has been effectively cut off from the futurist and avant-garde milieu in which he operated as poet, publicist and publisher: the 'unhealthy' ideas of the left-wing

avant-garde, of which Mayakovskii was the effective leader, have been pushed into the background.

Apart from the last few months of his life when he abandoned REF, the last bastion of independent avant-garde activity, to join the militantly proletarian, and artistically thoroughly uncongenial, RAPP (Rossiiskaya assotsiatsiya proletarskikh pisatelei), he always felt himself to be part of the broad movement of 'left', later Left Front, artists. To be sure, this movement lacked the proletarian organisations' links with the factory floor, but it was no less dedicated to the ideals of a revolutionary transformation of society. What the 'left' lacked in numbers, it made up for in the energy and vigour of its demand for innovation, for revolutionary art in a revolutionary society.

In the immediate post-revolutionary years, from 1917 to 1923 when the avant-garde was at the peak of its power and influence, before entering a steady decline to extinction in the early thirties, Mayakovskii was actively engaged in nearly every area of avant-garde activity. He worked as poet, painter, dramatist and movie actor. His entrepreneurial spirit ensured the publication of that key organ of the 'left', Iskusstvo kommuny. He was closely involved in cultural politics, sitting on government committees. The greater part of his energy was devoted to the cause of 'left' art, and he spent much effort in the attempt to weld

together his own group of politically committed artists. He was to succeed in 1923 with the establishing of the journal LEF, which brought together a remarkably heterogeneous group, comprising futurists, constructivists, productivists and formalists. But LEF, even though Mayakovskii published in it several remarkable essays and works of poetry and prose, ultimately failed. The Party leadership was not persuaded that 'left' art was an acceptable solution to the question of what art was needed by the socialist state. The revolutionary Party clung to a reactionary aesthetic.

Though as far as possible officially ignored in the USSR - it was instructive to note how few exhibits or photographs showing Mayakovskii as a representative of 'left' art were on display at the Mayakovskii Museum in Moscow - the work of the 'left' has aroused considerable interest in the West. During the last two decades the art of the 'twenties has been extensively rediscovered, with manifestoes and rare texts of the period published in translation. At the time I began work on this study comparatively little had been published even in the West on such questions as the part Mayakovskii played in the rise and decline of the 'left'; as the process of formation of the group he gathered round the magazine LEF; as the essential identity of interest and aesthetic among painters and poets which sprang from the fact

that many 'left' artists, and Mayakovskii in particular, were adept in several media. Nor has the process of transformation which led from cubo-futurist ideas about poetry and painting as autonomous activities ('slovo kak takovoe' or 'the word as such') to concepts of strict social utilitarianism which governed the verses of Mayakovskii just five years later been fully explored. To explain this, one must, I feel, turn to the effort of the 'left' theoreticians like Brik to formulate a general theory of the social function of art and their efforts also to master the dynamics of artistic development.

During the progress of my research, some material has been published which touches on the questions raised in these pages. Four years ago Bengt Jangfeldt published a study Majakovskij and Futurism 1917-1921, which has much valuable information on kom-fut, while Vagan Barooshian has recently published a book on Mayakovskii and Brik. However, the present study has a somewhat different perspective in aiming to show the passage of cubo-futurism into the Left Front; a process to which there were several distinct stages. The year after the February Revolution, until late in the spring of 1918, marked the final disintegration of the cubo-futurist movement. The year 1918 began on a note of revolutionary euphoria and was marked by the adaptation of old slogans to the new conditions. During the next two years the emphasis

inevitably falls on the visual arts. The summer of 1918 to early 1920 was the heroic period of the avant-garde, when flushed on revolutionary slogans the 'left' artists held the commanding heights in the new state art institutions. Abstract art was officially recognised and the slogan put forward that aesthetically revolutionary art alone coincided with the interests of the proletariat. Futurism became 'left' art. From there the focus moves to the question of political commitment to the creative agitational art; an essential element in the output of the 'left' artist until the end of the Civil War in 1921. Finally, there is the creation of the Left Front, the gathering together after the Civil War of the scattered remnants of the cubo-futurist movement around Mayakovskii, at that time confident that under the banner of the Left Front a politicised avant-garde could trounce its rivals in what was seen as a very real struggle for power in the arts.

An important place in the narrative is occupied by Mayakovskii's considerable abilities as an organiser and as a publisher. His powers of persuasion were such that he could obtain money and materials for publishing ventures where many others failed. His intention was always to present his work along with that of his friends and colleagues. He succeeded more usually in publishing only his own work.

Nevertheless, through these ventures one can follow the changing shape of cubo-futurism. One other important element in this account is a description of the group of futurists based in Vladivostok, the 'Tvorchestvo' group, which included the poets Nikolai Aseev, Sergei Tret'yakov and the journalist and theoretician Nikolai Chuzhak. The members of this group, particularly Tret'yakov and Chuzhak, were to have a great impact on the work of the Left Front - a negative impact in the case of Chuzhak - from 1923 onwards.

I have drawn extensively on periodicals of the immediate post-revolutionary years for this study, and I must express my gratitude to the British Council for providing the opportunity to work in the Lenin Library in Moscow. I would also like to thank the staff of the bibliographical department of the Mayakovskii Museum in Moscow for their assistance, Ms. M. Enzensberger for her invaluable help in obtaining copies of otherwise unobtainable texts and Dr. C.J. Barnes for his many helpful criticisms and for his seemingly inexhaustible patience during the long gestation period of this study.

For the transliteration, I have adopted the British system for Cyrillic - B.S.2979:1958, omitting diacritics.

LONDON
September, 1980

CHAPTER
I
REVOLUTION

The February Revolution of 1917, with its prospects of the liberalisation of all aspects of social life, was welcomed by Russian artists of all shades of opinion, avant-garde and conservative alike. Besides generating a sense of creative release, the revolution brought with it the promise of a democratic political order for the first time in Russian history. In their own field, artists felt that they could now take control of their own professional associations and also determine state cultural policy. As one Soviet commentator observed: "The February Revolution evoked a political activism unprecedented in Russia in the broadest sections of the population. Creative artists could not stand aside, the more so since questions of the organisation of the country's artistic life directly concerned a whole range of institutions which in the past had a state character".¹ Avant-garde artists were no exception. Many of them became actively involved in the cultural politics of the time, including Mayakovskii and Osip Brik.

1. E.A. Dinershtein, "Mayakovskii v fevrale - oktyabre 1917g.", in Novoe o Mayakovskom, Literaturnoe nasledstvo, vol. LXV, Moscow, 1958, p.542.

x a/

During the Provisional Government's brief existence, public discussion of the organisation of the arts did not overtly touch on aesthetics. Questions of political policy and artistic form became inseparable only after the bolsheviks' coup in October. In general, the avant-garde was extremely cautious in its attitude towards the authorities; past experience bred great suspicions towards any tendency to renew centralised administrative control over the arts. This was true even after the October Revolution, when the avant-garde, including its most radical members such as Mayakovskii and Brik, took much longer to accept Soviet art policy than is often recognised.

Shortly after taking office, the Provisional Government issued a proposal for the establishment of a Ministry of Fine Arts; a move that was interpreted by many Petrograd artists as the first step towards state controls. The artists countered swiftly by setting up their own organisation, the Soyuz deyatelei iskusstv or SDI, to ensure that artists themselves would control artistic life.

Artists of all persuasions joined the SDI, though it was the young members of the avant-garde who proved to be the most energetic and militant. The SDI split almost immediately into three factions; a 'right', "delovoi", bloc led by ^{the writer} Sologub, a non-partisan centre and a 'left' bloc, the avant-garde, headed nominally by the cubo-futurist painter

Il'ya Zdanevich. So divided, the SDI did little to recommend itself as a substitute for a Ministry. Nevertheless, it was in this divided and argumentative organisation that Mayakovskii began to show that not only was he ^{one} of the most talented of the younger generation, but that he was also one of its natural leaders. Here, too, Mayakovskii first began to formulate his ideas on the wider issues of cultural politics.

The 'left' bloc of the SDI consisted of a strange assortment of artists, the formations of a few years earlier having been broken up by the war. It included, besides Mayakovskii and Brik, the art critic Nikolai Punin, the artist Natan Al'tman and the theatre director Vsevolod Meierkhol'd. The 'left' label stuck to the avant-garde after October 1917 as a convenient indicator both of political allegiance and aesthetic inclination, but the term, in its first use at least, did not necessarily imply a commitment to revolutionary politics. The efforts of the 'left' at this stage were aimed at securing maximum advantage for the avant-garde; its militance was expressed in terms of a demand for the total autonomy of the arts.

The main demand of the 'left' was formulated in a resolution put forward by its umbrella organisation, the 'Freedom for Art' group, which called for "complete decentralisation in artistic life

and autonomy for all artistic institutions and societies, which should be financed by municipal authorities..."² Genuine desire for the democratisation of the arts was strengthened by a suspicion that central control, almost by definition conservative in character, would mean the imposition of policy hostile to the avant-garde.

Early in March 1917 the 'Freedom for Art' group organised a public meeting in a Petrograd theatre to protest against the setting up of an Arts Ministry. Mayakovskii, already a vigorous champion of the 'left',³ spoke in support of the bloc's call for autonomy and against the Provisional Government's 'undemocratic' Ministry. His opposition was aroused by mistrust of individual members of the Ministry. The dispute was not essentially political, for in his speech Mayakovskii revealed just how far the 'left' was from associating art with political action, concluding: "Long live the political life of Russia and long live art free from politics!"⁴

The call for autonomy was rejected. Defeated, the 'left' was forced to learn a first bitter lesson that ideas were no substitute

2. *ibid.*, p. 567, n.

3. Mayakovskii represented the 'left' bloc on the Praesidium of the SDI, along with Punin. He was also active on the 'left's' behalf in Moscow as well as Petrograd.

4. Dinershtein, *op. cit.*, p. 547.

for efficient organisation, and here the 'right' had the upper hand. The unity of the 'left' was shaky, for though Mayakovskii was committed to broadly the same programme of action as his avant-garde friends, his political views were far more radical. Thus, when it transpired that the political mood of the 'left' ran in favour of the right SR's, Mayakovskii declared himself to be "to the left of the 'left federation'", and went on to say that he recognised "no leftists except himself, Burlyuk and Larionov".⁵ He tried to force a split, to organise a new grouping. Nothing came of his efforts, but Mayakovskii would take no further part in the work of the SDI, at least not until after the October Revolution.

Mayakovskii's radicalism made itself felt in his verse. In May, the poem "Revolyutsiya", an expression of faith in a new, socialist order and also his first openly political declaration since abandoning ^{the} revolutionary activism ^{of his youth}, was published in Gor'kii's newspaper Novaya zhizn'. Others followed. In "K otvetu", ^{for example} Mayakovskii echoed the bolsheviks' condemnation of the war as 'imperialist'. He began work on the play "Misteriya-buff", a revolutionary folk epic, and he tried out his acid satirical wit on such targets

5. *ibid.*, p.548. Mayakovskii's choice of fellow leftists seems surprising in view of the fact that neither Burlyuk nor Larionov showed much enthusiasm for bolshevism.

7- as the right-wing Kadet party. It was as a satirist that Mayakovskii came into contact with the future bolshevik Commissar for Enlightenment, A.V.Lunacharskii, for the first time. Lunacharskii invited Mayakovskii to contribute to a satirical newspaper. The paper, to have been called Tachka, never actually appeared, but the future Commissar came away from his meetings with the poet very much impressed. In a letter Lunacharskii described Mayakovskii as a "super-talented young half-giant, infected with burning energy, going uphill and to the left before one's very eyes".⁶

Mayakovskii's response to the October Revolution is so well known as to scarcely bear repeating: "To accept or not to accept? That question did not arise for me (nor for the other Moscow Futurists). My revolution".⁷ He was among the first handful of artists in Petrograd to respond to an appeal from the bolshevik Central Committee to go to the Smol'nyi and make contact

6. In the same letter, dated 1 August, Lunacharskii named Brik as editor of the newspaper, Al'tman, Gorky, Benois and Petrov-Vodkin as contributors. He also gave the futurists' political affiliations as 's.(ocial)-d.(emocrats)'. V.D. Zel'dovich, "Pervaya vstrecha Lunacharskogo s Mayakovskim v 1917g.", Novoe o Mayakovskom, p. 571.

7. V.V. Mayakovskii, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 13-i tomakh, Moscow, 1955-1961, vol.I, p.25. All subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated in the text by Roman and Arabic numerals for volume and page respectively.

with the new regime.⁸ As early as December 1917 he was negotiating with Lunacharskii the establishing of a publishing house - ASIS (Assotsiatsiya sotsialisticheskogo iskusstva).⁹ On questions of artistic policy, however, his relations with the bolsheviks were rather more equivocal, as were those of the 'left' artists generally.

After the October Revolution, Mayakovskii resumed his activities in the SDI. He joined forces again with the 'left' bloc, which categorically rejected Lunacharskii's proposals for establishing administrative bodies for the arts by continuing to demand total autonomy for artistic institutions. Lunacharskii's first approach to the SDI, made through Punin, with a proposal for a soviet on art affairs to be controlled jointly by artists and delegates from the Soviet of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies, was rejected unanimously by the SDI. However, the artists, anxious not to give offence, replied

8. Among the four or five other members of the creative intelligentsia to attend were Meierkhol'd, Blok and Larissa Reisner.

9. These negotiations came to nothing and Mayakovskii published the two works which appeared under the ASIS imprint - "Chelovek" and the first uncensored edition of "Oblako v shtanakh", out of his own funds. E.A. Dinerstein, "Izdatel'skaya deyatel'nost' V.V. Mayakovskogo", Kniga. Issledovaniya i materialy. Sbornik XVII, Moscow, 1968, p. 156.

evasively. The SDI, they suggested, had its own measures in hand for sounding out opinion in the art world and was calling an artists' Constituent Assembly. The bolsheviks had already shown their contempt for representational bodies of this type, but curiously enough the stance of the SDI as a whole was much more placatory towards the bolsheviks than that of the 'left' bloc. As in March 1917, the 'left' perceived state control as a threat and so passed a resolution declaring that "Commissar Lunacharskii's appeal is unclear in the sense of the relationship of state power to ^{the} autonomy of art and forces the contemporary left movement to a passive compromise with dead academicism and artistic bureaucracy. Commissar Lunacharskii is clearly destroying the beginnings of the creation of the artistic life of the future on the only correct, contemporary bases proposed by the left tendencies, and is handing over power to discredited guardians of art".¹⁰

A second approach by Lunacharskii, this time using Brik as an intermediary, had the more limited aim of seeking the cooperation of the SDI in

10. O.M. Brik, "Mayakovskii - redaktor i organizator", Literaturnyi kritik, 1936, No.4, p.114.

forming a commission, again jointly with representatives from 'democratic organisations', for the protection of cultural monuments. Both 'left' and 'right' factions once more rejected Lunacharskii's proposal.¹¹ In a speech, Sologub expressed a principle on which all were agreed: "We wish to take nothing from the people as Lunacharskii believes, for Lunacharskii is not the people but only a 'gentleman in a jacket', from whom art, the property of the whole people, must be protected".¹² Mayakovskii was one of only two objectors to Sologub's statement; yet he did not disagree with Sologub in principle. He simply added the proviso that in order to "seize that property it is necessary to turn to the new regime and welcome it".¹³

Though many of the 'left', including Mayakovskii, were politically close to the bolsheviks, in terms of cultural policy they continued to demand autonomy from the state. As Sologub pointed out, not without satisfaction, all factions of the SDI were "at one in their attitude to both Golovin and Lunacharskii".¹⁴ Sologub's opinion that it was only differences on matters of aesthetics that divided the

11. Two SDI members abstained from the vote on this issue. One of them is believed to have been Mayakovskii.

12. E.A. Dinershtein, "Mayakovskii v fevrale - oktyabre 1917g.", op. cit., p.566.

13. *ibid.* Usually only the latter part of Mayakovskii's statement is quoted in Soviet sources, so distorting Mayakovskii's stated position. See Mayakovskii, XII, 215.

14. *ibid.* Golovin was Minister of Fine Arts in the Provisional Government.

competing factions was, however, profoundly mistaken. It was not long before irreconcilable political differences drove the 'left' out of the SDI and into IZO Narkomprosa, the Department of Visual Arts of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, when it was set up by the bolsheviks in the spring of 1918.

Mayakovskii and Brik held back from joining their colleagues from the SDI in the newly formed IZO Narkomprosa until the autumn of 1918. Unable to agree with Lunacharskii in December 1917, Mayakovskii had returned to Moscow, to take part in more spectacularly futurist activities. The People's Commissar's policy was to attract as broad a spectrum of support for the bolsheviks as possible, and Mayakovskii found little encouragement for his call for a clean sweep of the past.¹⁵ "Mayakovskii was disappointed", Brik wrote.

"Unable to agree with the People's Commissar or find
a/ other prop/ganda outlets for 'left' art, Mayakovskii left for Moscow, where, together with Burlyuk and Kamenskii, he attempted to talk to the people over Lunacharskii's head, to convince workers and peasants to reject the old art and turn to art that was in tune with the revolution, to 'left' art."¹⁶

15. According to Mayakovskii, Brik was just as radical.

"The landlords were rich, hence their estates were monuments of art", he quotes Brik as saying. "Landlords have existed for a long time, thus their art is old. To defend ancient monuments means to defend the landlords. Down with them!" XII, 151.

16. O.M. Brik, "IMO - iskusstvo molodykh", in Mayakovskomu, Leningrad, 1940, p.89.

Mayakovskii's appeal to the general public was made from the stage of the Kafe poetov, one of the many literary and artistic cabarets that sprang up at this time and where poets and artists could earn a precarious living by entertaining a very motley clientele. The Kafe poetov had been opened by Kamenskii in the autumn of 1917, and he was soon joined by David Burlyuk. As soon as the first Red Guard detachments came into action in Moscow, Kamenskii declared for the bolsheviks, and from then until the Kafe closed in April 1918, he and his fellow futurists enjoyed a succes de scandale reading revolutionary verses.

It was from here that the futurists published, in March, the only issue of the newspaper, the Gazeta futuristov, which was flyposted on walls and fences around Moscow. Besides verse by Mayakovskii, Burlyuk and Kamenskii, the Gazeta futuristov carried the first declarations of literary futurism of the Soviet period.

The two manifestoes in the paper were euphoric in tone. The "Manifest letuchei federatsii futuristov" opened with a claim that was to become increasingly familiar: the artistic revolution of the 'left' coincided with the needs and interests of the political revolution. The old order had rested on three props - "political slavery, social slavery, spiritual slavery"¹⁷ -

17. "Manifest letuchei federatsii futuristov", Gazeta futuristov, Moscow, March 15, 1918.

but while political and social freedom had been won, in art the old order remained intact. Tsarist monuments still stood; theatres maintained the same old repertoire. "We, the proletarians of art, call on the proletarians of factory and field to a third, bloodless but fierce revolution - the revolution of the spirit".¹⁸ The appeal of the very first cubo-futurist manifesto, the notorious "Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu", to discard the models of the past, to throw overboard Pushkin, Tolstoi and Dostoevskii, and move in new directions, thus remained in force and acquired, what's more, new significance.

[an] The manifesto also put forward once again the demand for the separation of the arts from the state and included concrete proposals as to the organisation of artistic life. All halls for performances and exhibitions should be handed over to the artists to run for themselves; artistic education should be universal; there should be an end to official prizes and honours. This programme followed very closely suggestions advanced by a friend and colleague of Brik, Boris Kushner,¹⁹ in a pamphlet published during the summer of 1917.

Calling for the democratisation of artistic institutions, Kushner proposed the formation of an autonomous corporation of artists. This corporation would take over from

18. *ibid.*

19. See B.A. Kushner, Demokratizatsiya iskusstvu, Petrograd, 1917. Kushner, like Brik, was active in the Petrograd-based OPOYAZ or Society for the Study of Poetic Language. The society was the meeting place for the young formalists and the futurists.

the gallery market and supervise the remuneration of artists; all this on strictly egalitarian grounds, with artists to be considered professionally equal and their work, in terms of financial rewards, to be of identical economic value. Some of Kushner's proposals were put into practice. His recommendation that art training should be open to all and with a free choice of teachers was carried out in the revolutionary art schools, the Petrograd SVOMAS and Moscow VKhUTEMAS, staffed largely by 'left' artists. His call for [an institute for] a theoretical research institute to complement the practical training given by art schools was realised in the shape of INKhUK, also a bastion of the 'left'.

What the futurists understood by the democratisation of art in practical terms was shown in a second, better-known manifesto, the "Dekret No 1 o demokratizatsii iskusstv". "In the name of the great step of the equality of all before culture, let the Free Word of the creative personality be written on house walls, fences, roofs, streets of our towns and settlements, on the backs of cars, carts and trams and on the clothing of every citizen. ... Let the streets be a festival of art for all". (XII, 443) As an illustration of this principle, Burlyuk hung up his paintings on the outside of a house on the Kuznetskii most: art was to merge with life.

This impulse was nothing new to cubo-futurism; Larionov had painted his face in this very cause, but in the atmosphere of the revolution it acquired new impetus. Here at last was an opportunity to overcome the barriers that alienated the creative artist from the masses. No longer would experiment take place in a social vacuum. The ideas expressed in the "Dekret No.1" were shared by the 'left' as a whole. Street decorations were erected in Moscow. In Petrograd, Al'tman decorated the Palace Square for a re-enactment of the storming of the Winter Palace staged to celebrate the first anniversary of the Revolution. Malevich, Lisitskii and the UNOVIS group painted buildings in Vitebsk with suprematist designs.

Besides the manifestoes, Mayakovskii, Burlyuk and Kamenskii each contributed signed articles. Mayakovskii's "Otkrytoe pis'mo rabochim" centred on a single basic point; "the revolution of content, socialism-anarchism, is inconceivable without a revolution in form, futurism". (XII, 443). This simple formula, and the consequent refusal to admit the validity of realist art forms,²⁰ surely lay at the heart of the disagreement between Mayakovskii and Lunacharskii, just as in the future it was to provide orthodox marxist critics with ammunition against the 'left'. But Mayakovskii

20. In a lighthearted modification of the famous "Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu", Mayakovskii consigned the art of the past not to the dustbin, but to the schoolroom as a teaching aid in geography or history lessons.

6/ was utterly convinced that it was the new art alone that could give adequate expression to the new, socialist millenium. He concluded his article with an ecstatic vision of the future:

Noone can know what immense suns will light life in the future. Perhaps artists will turn the cities' grey dust into hundred-coloured rainbows, perhaps the thundering music of volcanoes turned into flutes will ring endlessly from mountain ridges, perhaps the ocean's waves will be made to strum the nets of strings stretched from Europe to America. One thing is clear. The first page of the latest history of art has been opened by us. (XII,9)

Russian? —
Soviet?

The ideas expressed in the articles by Burlyuk and Kamenskii contrast very sharply with Mayakovskii's. For Burlyuk, art was free, totally free, of politics. "Art" he wrote, "is ever and always only 'senseless caprice'".²¹ Burlyuk, in fact, seems to have lost his former futurist fire, and affirmed a spirit of moderation, ^{of} compromise alien to the 'left':

Let us be honest and wise; let us not be executioners. Let us always respect the creative personality which strives towards freedom. Let us divide all studios, art

21. D. Burlyuk, "Obrashehenie k molodym khudozhnikam", Gazeta futuristoy, Moscow, 1918.

schools and academies evenly amongst all tendencies of different artistic persuasion so that each can work freely for the glory of our native art.²²

As for Kamenskii, his writing was affected by a mawkish exhibitionism. He praised to the skies the virtues of Burlyuk, Mayakovskii and himself. Yet Kamenskii was not uncommitted politically. His long poem "Sten'ka Razin", a celebration of the peasant leader's revolt, written and published before the Revolution and reprinted in the Gazeta futuristov, was obviously emotionally in tune with the atmosphere of revolution. According to his own account, it was much in demand at public readings, but he was more of an enthusiastic spectator on the sidelines than a serious participant in the struggle for a new art.

As an attempt on the part of the futurists to make contact with a mass audience and make their voice felt as a revolutionary grouping, the Kafe poetov and the newspaper published from it were a dismal failure. The public they actually reached was tiny in number and politically questionable. Claims to be 'the only federation of revolutionary art in the world' could have raised only a smile, ^{though} Mayakovskii undoubtedly was serious in his intention to create revolutionary art. Cubo-futurism, however, had become an irrelevance; the epatage of Burlyuk's 'I like pregnant men'

an embarrassment. It is evident from Mayakovskii's letters that, after initially relishing the return to the bohemianism of the Kafe poetov, by the middle of January 1918 he was growing tired of it.

The closure of the Kafe poetov in April marked the end of cubo-futurism as a bohemian avant-garde movement. Mayakovskii acted in three films made by a private studio,²³ before leaving for Petrograd in July 1918 and joining IZO Narkomprosa. Burlyuk left that summer on his long journey to the USA which took him through Siberia and the Far East. Kamenskii was to be caught up in the shifting fronts of the Civil War in the south of Russia, and when he made his way back to Moscow at the beginning of the 'twenties, he was active only on the fringes of the Lef group. Subsequent

23. These films, "Ne dlya deneg rodivshchisya", "Baryshnya i khuligan", "Zakovannyi fil'mom", were made by the Neptune company and starred Mayakovskii and, in two of the films, Lilya Brik. These commercial ventures, in which Mayakovskii played heroes with a remarkable resemblance to himself, were not a happy experience. The director, Turkin, had no sympathy with futurism, and Mayakovskii was asked to do scenes, which, while acceptable commercially, must have been very distasteful. In "Baryshnya i khuligan" for example, Mayakovskii, acting the part of the hoodligan, enacts a death-bed scene, during which he receives last rites from a priest. Mayakovskii later succeeded in getting this scene removed, but it has survived in Western archive copies of the film.

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developments in futurism were to take place very much under Mayakovskii's influence. Whereas previously the emphasis of the practice of the movement had lain on the autonomy of the poetic word, with linguistic experiment an end in itself in the zaum' works of Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov, in post-revolutionary futurism politically motivated and socially utilitarian verse dominated the movement's practice. Zaum' and other varieties of purely linguistic experiment were relegated to a supporting role as a linguistic laboratory for developing the poetic word as a scientifically organised and efficient means of operating through the emotions to create a desirable social effect.

With his dual commitment to futurism and revolution, Mayakovskii wanted to bring together a group of artists and theoreticians who would propagandise the new art amongst a working class public. Both the futurists and the 'left' lacked the necessary organisation and finance, and Mayakovskii soon realised that appeals for autonomy were no solution to the problem. With the artistic Establishment chary of the **Bolsheviks**, the 'left' seized its opportunity and worked for the artistic revolution through the fragile institutions of the revolutionary state.

CHAPTER
II
IMO AND ISKUSSTVO KOMMUNY

In July 1918 Mayakovskii moved back to Petrograd and took up once more the thread of his organisational activities. These took two main forms. On the one hand, he sought to propagandise literary futurism by setting up a publishing house to bring out the works of the futurist poets and formalist theoreticians closest to him. At the same time he rejoined his colleagues of the 'left' bloc of the SDI who had gone over en masse to IZO Narkomprosa. There, Mayakovskii played an active role in the publication of IZO's newspaper Iskusstvo kommuny.

5/ Brik, too, combined interest in literature and the visual arts. At this stage, however, literature played very much a subordinate role, and it was in IZO that the first stages of the debate on the creation of a specifically proletarian art and culture took place. Literary life had, in any case virtually ceased, with poets forced to recourse to the traditions of oral poetry in the freezing literary cabarets. *I have* Mayakovskii, nevertheless, made a determined bid to make futurism known to the masses.

IMO, or Iskusstvo molodykh, had been organised by Brik in Petrograd early in 1918. It was a loosely-knit organisation of 'left' artists and writers with the purpose of disseminating avant-garde art and literature by means of exhibitions and literary evenings. When Mayakovskii arrived in Petrograd with plans for an anthology of futurist verse,¹ IMO suddenly acquired a new dimension.

In July 1918 Mayakovskii approached the Petrograd board of Narkompros with a request for financial support for his anthology. Armed with Lunacharskii's backing, Mayakovskii gained approval not just for his anthology, but for a much larger publishing venture as well. On July 27 the IMO publishing house, with Mayakovskii, Brik and Shklovskii as directors and Roman Jakobson as secretary, was established under the auspices of Narkompros with a guaranteed output of twelve titles a year and complete editorial freedom.

IMO was intended as a purely literary venture bringing together futurists and formalists and demonstrating the creative and theoretical superiority of these ^{over all rivals} movements. The following

1. Such an anthology had already been announced in the Gazeta futuristov.

were listed as collaborators:

Pure word:

Theory of the word:

1. Assev N.

1. Brik O.

2. Burluk D.

2. Kushner B.

3. Kamenskii V.

3. Polivanov D.

4. Kruchenykh A.

4. Eikhenbaum B.

5. Mayakovskii V.

5. Yakubinskii L.

6. Pasternak B.

6. Shklovskii V.

7. Khlebnikov V.

7. Yakobson R. ²

There were plans to publish a cross-section of futurist and formalist works, including selections of verse by Pasternak and Khlebnikov and an anthology of theoretical articles, but of the twelve titles guaranteed under the agreement with Nar-kompros only six ever appeared. Even these were scarcely representative, since only two, Rzhanoé slovo and Poetika, were anthologies, of verse and theory respectively, while the remaining four IMO publications were editions of Mayakovskii's own verse.³

After much effort, Mayakovskii succeeded in bringing out the first two IMO editions in time to celebrate the first anniversary of the Revolution, the anthology Rzhanoé slovo and the first

2. Statute of IMO, quoted by Dinershtein, "Izdatel'skaya deyatel'nost' V.V. Mayakovskogo", op.cit., p.159
3. In quantity, too, Mayakovskii's verse had the lion's share. A total of 55,000 copies of his works were printed as opposed to 5,000 copies of Rzhanoé slovo and 10,000 of Poetika.

edition of his play "Misteriya-buff". Rzhanoe slovo was compiled by Mayakovskii with the intention of presenting the futurists, who comprised for the purposes of the anthology Aseev, Burlyuk, Kamenskii, Kushner, Mayakovskii and Khlebnikov, as a group for whom modernism was organically connected with the social revolution. With characteristic bravado Mayakovskii declared; "It is a collection of poems on a special theme - the word 'revolution' in the hands of revolutionaries of the word".⁴ In staking his claim to the title 'revolutionary' for the futurists, Mayakovskii was clearly aware of the possible harm that could be done to them by other futurist groups less radically inclined.⁵ Already, Brik noted, a more acute sense of the realities of linking art with the political cause of the revolution is noticeable in Mayakovskii. This change was wrought by the poet's work in IZO Narkomprosa, where the atmosphere was very different ~~to~~ the overheated air of the literary cafes. As Brik observes:

from/ ?[]

In July (1918) futurism was still for Mayakovskii an innovatory literary

4. Quoted by Brik in "IMO", op.cit., p.96.

5. Mayakovskii mentioned Igor" Severyanin, leader of the ego-futurists, and Marinetti by name. Severyanin, whose absurdly exotic verse confessions were immensely popular, was never much more than an irritant. Marinetti, however, with his support for Mussolini, was to be a constant reproach, hurled at the futurists on every possible occasion by hostile critics.

tendency significant on its own terms. The futurists were formal revolutionaries. This should have been sufficient for the recognition of their right to be published by the revolutionary socialist state.

Two months later Mayakovskii's position had changed. The reason that the futurists were necessary to the revolution was not because they were revolutionaries of form, but because a genuine revolution in form was naturally connected to the social revolution. As a result, not all futurists were necessary to the social revolution, only those who found a spiritual outlet in the revolution.⁶

Most of the material in Rzhance slovo consisted of reprints of already published texts, including a selection from Aseev's book Oksana, excerpts from Mayakovskii's "Voina i mir" and from Kamen'skii's "Sten'ka Razin", while Khlebnikov's "Zaklyatie smekhom" was a classic, the classic cubo-futurist poem, and Burlyuk's "Utverzhdenie bodrosti" no less notorious. The one new work of interest was by Mayakovskii - "Nash marsh". Thus intended as a basic introduction to the scattered texts of the cubo-futurist^f for a new, mass audience which was totally unfamiliar with the movement, the anthology was also an affirmation of faith on the part of its compiler in the vitality

6. O.M. Brik, "IMO", op. cit., p.96

and validity of the new art. Mayakovskii was confident that the future would "delineate the figure of futurism at full height - it is not a corpse to be anatomised, but a fighter unfurling a banner". (XII,13)

This was a vigour that some sought to deny. The critic Vyacheslav Polonskii, a determined opponent of the 'left' until its demise, wrote only weeks after the October Revolution:

The drums of futurism are silent. The school of literary 'overthrowers' has itself been overthrown by the merciless hand of time. Mayakovskii alone remains, and then not because he is a futurist but because, as opposed to his comrades, he possesses an outstanding poetic talent.⁷

Polonskii's assessment of the futurists, so typical of the aesthetically conservative marxist critics, was in an important sense accurate. The 'drums' of cubo-futurism had indeed 'fallen silent' after the Revolution, with the exception of Mayakovskii, but not because the movement had exhausted itself. The contributors to Rzhance slovo were widely scattered throughout the former Russian Empire. Several of them, like Aseev, stranded in Vladivostok, or Kruchenykh, sheltering in Tiflis, were to be cut off from the centre by White armies. Mayakovskii remained very much on his own at the centre and it was not until 1922 that futurism

7. V. Polonskii, quoted by Dinershtein, "Mayakovskii v fevrle - oktyabre 1917 g.". op.cit., p.567

re-established its identity as a literary movement.

This first post-revolutionary futurist anthology also contained a cautious welcoming foreword by Lunacharskii, who, in anticipation of protests that the state should squander money on such literature, advanced a policy of artistic tolerance. As the most important patron of the arts, the state, he argued, should foster as wide a range of literary activity as possible, including difficult experimental work. "It is better", he wrote "to make a mistake and offer the people something which cannot, either now or later, win their sympathy than hide under a bushel a work that is of priceless value to future generations (on the grounds that it is not to someone or other's taste)".⁸

Lunacharskii's support was crucial to the futurists; without him they could publish nothing. Yet while prepared to give Mayakovskii his assistance, Lunacharskii was quite prepared to attack futurism when Party opinion on the arts was sufficiently offended.

Despite all Mayakovskii's efforts and ingenuity, finding presses that would work, ink, paper and, no less important, a distributor during the chaos of the winter of 1918, IMO could not complete its plans. Two editions of Mayakovskii's verse appeared early in 1919 before the venture ran out of money. Lunacharskii came to the rescue, and in February

8. A.V. Lunacharskii, Sobranie sochinenii, Moscow, 1964, vol. II, p. 205.

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1919 approved a list of books that included an edition of Khlebnikov's verse, with an introduction by Jakobson, an edition of Kamenskii's verse, Pasternak's Sestra moja /zhizn', an epic poem by Mayakovskii⁹, an expanded edition of Rzhance slovo and collections of essays. Sadly, of these ambitious plans little was realised. The last IMO publication came out in May 1919, a slim volume of essays entitled Poetika.¹⁰

Poetika was the third in a series of OPOYAZ anthologies. Both this collection and Jakobson's introduction to the Khlebnikov edition, which Jakobson was eventually able to publish in Prague, attested to the very close relationship between cubo-futurism and formalism. Not only did young theoreticians of literature find inspiration in the technical innovations of futurist verse, but futurist poets, in particular Mayakovskii, were convinced of the value of the formalist approach

9. The poem was entitled "Volya millionov". After a later change of title to "'Ivan'. Bylina, epos revolyutsii", the poem saw the light of day as "150,000,000".

10. IMO closed largely because of the hostility to futurism the 'left' so much feared. When in May 1919 the publishing industry was nationalised, IMO passed under the jurisdiction of Gosizdat, the state publishing house. The board of Gosizdat consisted of bolsheviks stoutly opposed to futurism, and it refused all requests for subsidies for IMO, even when these requests had Lunacharskii's backing.

to the analysis of literary form.¹¹

xa/ The conception of literary form advanced in the Poetika essays, which included such basic texts as Shklovskii's seminal "Iskusstvo kak priem" and Brik's "Zvukovye povtory", was to prove unreconcilable with the extrinsic sociological approach of the bolshevik literary critics. Nevertheless, for the 'left', formalism offered every hope of establishing a scientific methodology of literary analysis appropriate to a socialist society.

o/ Formalism was very much a product of the modernist revolution in Russian art and literature, feeding on the avant-garde's discovery of pure form. As Boris Eikhenbaum put it, the formalists sought to "liberate the poetic word from the fetters of philosophical and religious tendencies which had achieved considerable prominence in

11. Mayakovskii's verse, along with Khlebnikov's, provided the formalists with plenty of material. Mayakovskii himself had the greatest respect for the formalists' researches and often attended the meetings of the ^{formalist} Moscow Linguistic Circle. A revealing instance of just how close the interaction between poet and theoretician could be has been described by Jakobson. He relates how a passage of alliterative prose by one of the formalists doubling as creative writer, Kushner's "Miting dvortsov", published in Rzhance slovo, and a folk paronomasia quoted by Jakobson at a meeting of the MLC both helped to shape a key passage in Mayakovskii's "150,000,000". See R. Jakobson, "The Drum Lines in Majakovskij's '150,000,000'", California Slavic Studies, Vol. VI, Berkley, 1971, pp. 39-41.

symbolism".¹² The formalists' tactic in attacking symbolist poetics consisted not so much in challenging the symbolist world view, as in formulating a technicist concept of art as a system of 'devices' which could be classified and counted in opposition to the symbolist understanding of art as 'image'. In Shklovskii's early programmatic essays, like "Iskusstvo kak priem", the formulation of the idea of the device was in fact designed to lend support to the new art with its deliberate difficulties and distortions. Shklovskii wrote:

Thus in order to restore the sensing of life, to feel objects, in order to make a stone stony there exists that which is called art. The aim of art is to convey the sensing of the object, as seeing and not as recognition; the device of art is the device of the 'making strange' (ostranenie) of objects and the device of impeded form ... Art is the means of experiencing the making of an object, while what has been made is unimportant.¹³

But it was Jakobson, in his essay on Khlebnikov, who put forward the most effective description of the formalists' efforts to isolate and evaluate

12. B. Eikhenbaum, quoted by V. Erlich in, Russian Formalism: History - Doctrine, The Hague, 1965, p. 72

13. V.B. Shklovskii, "Iskusstvo kak priem", Texte der Russischen Formalisten, vol. I, Munich, 1969, p.24

the specific characteristics of a work of literature.

Hé wrote:

Poetry is language in its aesthetic function.

Thus the object of the science of literature is not literature but 'literariness', i.e. that which makes a given work a literary work.¹⁴

This emphasis on the special attributes of poetic language, the effort to establish the qualitative distinction of poetry from other kinds of utterance, led Jakobson and his companions, including Brik, to confine the field of study to the analysis of the component parts of a work; its language and devices. In Jakobson's vivid description:

Historians of literature have until now generally resembled the police, who in trying to arrest one particular person grab, to be on the safe side, everyone and everything that happens to be in the apartment, and the passers by on the street as well. Thus historians of literature made use of everything - everyday life, psychology, politics, philosophy. A conglomerate of crude disciplines was created instead of a science of literature. ... If the study of literature wishes to become a science, it must recognise the 'device' as its only 'hero'.¹⁵

14. R.O. Jakobson, "Noveishaya russkaya poeziya", Texte der Russischen Formalisten, vol. II, Munich, 1972, p.30.

15. *ibid.*, pp. 30-32

The essays in Poetika were given over to the study of specific aspects of poetic and prosaic technique, with Yakubinskii writing on the distinctions between poetic and practical speech, Brik analysing sound repetitions in the verse of Pushkin and Lermontov and Eikhenbaum describing the structure of Gogol's short story "Shinel".

Not surprisingly, in the effort to turn literary criticism into an "independent and specific science with its own area of concrete problems"¹⁶ there was a good deal of overstatement. A favourite target for Bolshevik opponents of formalism was the flamboyant dismissal of the role of content in a work of imaginative literature. Jakobson, for example, treated content as a means simply of motivating the device, as a mere afterthought on the part of the author. "To incriminate the poet with ideas and feelings", he wrote "is as absurd as the conduct of the mediaeval audiences in beating up the actors playing Judas".¹⁷ Exaggeration of this sort served to highlight the formalists' concern with intrinsic description of literature which, Mayakovskii was to assert, was an essential precondition for an accurate assessment of literature even in its broader social and political context.

16. B. Eikhenbaum, "Vokrug voprosa o 'formalistakh'", Pechat' i revolyutsiaya, 1924, No.5. p.2.

17. R.O. Jakobson, "Noveishaya russkaya poeziya", op. cit., p.40.

The formalists made little attempt to reconcile their methods with the dictates of marxism. While many of the 'left' sought to place the argument for modernism on a political footing, for the formalists "the urge towards the specification of literary science"¹⁸ overrode political concerns. This applied to such left-wingers among them as Kushner, Yakubinskii, even Brik, who led the way in formulating the political programme of the 'left'.¹⁹ Efforts on the part of the formalists to widen the scope of their inquiry did not come until rather later; for instance, not until Shklovskii returned from his political exile in Germany in 1923 was he prepared to admit that literature might have a social function.

In Shklovskii's case, however, resistance to the social in art was part and parcel of his deeply-held anti-bolshevism. At almost exactly

18. B. Eikhenbaum, op. cit., p.3. Original emphasis.

19. Brik continued to participate in formalist literary activities. He remained a member of the MLC, and was, according to Jakobson, instrumental in the rise of "this linguistic laboratory which was a catalyst in the development of the younger scholarly generation, during 1919-1920. Brik lectured at MLC meetings and wrote papers on the poetic epithet and Gogol's Nos. See R. Jakobson's postscript to O.M. Brik, Two Essays on Poetic Language, Ann Arbor, 1964.

the same time as Poetika was being prepared for publication, Shklovskii was berating his publisher for making the "mistake" of "equating the social revolution with the revolution of artistic forms".²⁰ While Mayakovskii and Brik, the one in verse, the other as propagandist of a new socialised art, wrote of the need for utilitarian art, Shklovskii defiantly restated his belief in the autonomy of art and spoke of a betrayal of futurism. He wrote:

Art was always free of life and its colour
never reflected the colour of the flag
above the fortress of the city. ... New
forms of art appear not in order to express
new content, but in order to replace old
forms which have ceased to be artistic.
... And we futurists link our creativity
with the Third International. Comrades,
that is the surrender of all our positions.²¹

By the time Shklovskii made his appeal, however, it was already too late; the 'left' had made its accommodation with the Bolsheviki.

In the autumn of 1918 Mayakovskii and Brik were co-opted by Al'tman, Punin and their other colleagues of the 'left' onto the board of IZO

20. V.B. Shklovskii, "Ob iskusstve i revolyutsii", Iskusstvo kommuny, Petrograd, 1919, No.10.

21. *ibid.*

Narkomprosa, and so ^{invited} to take a direct hand in the formulation of state art policy. For a period of roughly two years from the setting up of IZO by Commissar Lunacharskii late in January 1918, the Department was dominated by representatives of the 'left', so much so that at times it must have appeared as though the avant-garde had succeeded in obtaining official recognition or even in establishing its own dictatorship. But as Lunacharskii was later to explain, the 'left' was able to move into a position of strength largely by default. In a memoir Lunacharskii observed:

In Petrograd artistic circles a tendency reigned that was hostile towards us. All sorts of resolutions of a more or less saboteurial type were carried at meetings of the SDI. ... Even the official extreme left artists ... were inclined to dictate various conditions to the Soviet authorities, upon fulfillment of which they were ready to make a certain amount of contact with the 'self-styled authorities'. Somewhat later in comrade Gor'kii's flat it was directly suggested that I should accept, in its entirety, a list of the 'chosen' who had agreed to 'work' with me, but not with my assistants ...

All this was absolutely unacceptable to me as the representative of Soviet power. In the field of art it was vitally necessary to destroy the remnants of institutions that were tsarist in essence like the Academy of Arts; it was necessary to free the schools from the old 'personalities'; it was necessary to give freedom of movement on an equal basis to all tendencies; it was necessary in particular to win the sympathy of young people and rely on them, swelling their ranks with proletarians and semi-proletarians.²²

With the 'left' continuing to demand autonomy, Lunacharskii turned to an old acquaintance from the time of his exile in Paris, the painter David Shterenberg. On Lunacharskii's own admission, Shterenberg was a "determined modernist", and when it came to carrying out Lunacharskii's radical policies, he sought and found "support for his activities almost exclusively amongst the extreme left".²³ The presence of a modernist at the head of IZO doubtless allayed the fears of the 'left' on the possibility of discrimination, and so, with Shterenberg's assistance, the 'left' artists effectively took control of the major

22. A.V. Lunacharskii, "Ob otdele izobrazitel'nikh iskusstv", in A. Ermakov (ed.), "Iz literaturnogo naslediya A.V. lunacharskogo", Novyi mir, Moscow, 1966, No.9, p.237.

23. *ibid.*

policy-making and administrative bodies in the visual arts in Petrograd, Moscow and provincial towns such as Vitebsk.²⁴

The 'left' used its new-found power to good advantage, pushing through sweeping reforms in the art schools and purchasing modernist works for museums, so making Soviet Russia the first state to sponsor officially abstract art. All this was in marked contrast to the utter helplessness of the self-styled literary 'left', which in practical terms can only have consisted of Mayakovskii's tiny band. An unsigned article in Iskusstvo kommuny, the organ of IZO, complained that 'left' writers lacked recognition and had to rely on the personal benevolence of Lunacharskii for publication.²⁵ One result was that Cubofuturism tended to lose its identification with the literary movement. As Al'tman wrote, futurism now included "all left artistic tendencies,"²⁶ a usage which journalists were only too

24. Each of these centres had its own branch of IZO. The membership of Petrograd IZO - Shterenberg, Punin, Al'tman, Mayakovskii and Brik - tended to be more radically inclined, politically speaking, than their Moscow colleagues - Kandinskii, Malevich, Tatlin and Rozanova. Vitebsk IZO was headed by Mark Shagal'.

25. Unsigned, untitled article in Iskusstvo kommuny, Petrograd, 1918, No.1.

26. N.I. Al'tman, "Futurizm i proletarskoe iskusstvo", Iskusstvo kommuny, 1918, No.2.

pleased to adopt. The term futurism now came to refer to a generalised cultural programme which equated the experimental values of modernist art with the social transformation wrought by the political revolution. In the drive to create a new art for a new society, the visionary powers of futurists such as Khlebnikov acquired renewed significance as harbingers of a creative social order.

For a brief period of five months, from December 1918 to April 1919, the 'left' had the unrivalled luxury of possessing its own newspaper, Iskusstvo kommuny, edited by Al'tman, Brik and Punin. In theory the columns of the paper were open to all shades of opinion; in practice, however, it served the 'left' alone, with contributions coming from, among others, Mayakovskii,²⁷ Shagal', Malevich, Puni, Kushner, Meir'khol'd, apart from the editors.

27. Though Mayakovskii was not officially on the editorial board of the paper, he was very active behind the scenes. When the idea of publishing a paper was first discussed at a meeting of the IZO board in November 1918, he spoke in its support. Turning words into action, he presented the board with a fait accompli - 10,000 copies of Iskusstvo kommuny No.1 - just one week later. He also organised such basic, though vital, matters as printing and distribution. See A.V. Fevral'skii, "Iz vystuplenii Mayakovskogo, 1918-1925 gg.", Novoe o Mayakovskom, pp. 578-582, 601n.

4 The basic line followed in Iskusstvo kommuny, the line absolutely rejected by Shklovskii in the article already quoted, was that, in Punin's words, "the social revolution coincided completely with the revolution in art",²⁸ The new social order, Mayakovskii declared at a public meeting, required new art forms:

from/ One must talk about the new in new words. A new art form is necessary. It is not enough to erect a monument to a metal worker; it is essential that it should be different to the statue of the Printer erected by the Tsar. (XII, 452)

Thus, the revolution reinforced the iconoclastic tendencies of the avant-garde. The creation of the new order entailed the sweeping away of the old art, and not just because it was obsolete in aesthetic terms. The old art, created by and for the bourgeoisie, conveyed an ideology totally alien to the proletariat, which was in any case culturally extremely weak. The urge to destroy was expressed most graphically by Mayakovskii in one of the several editorials in verse he composed for Iskusstvo kommuny:

Белогвардейца
найдете - и к стенке.
А Рафаеля забыли?
Забыли Растрелли вы? (II, 16)

28. N.N. Punin "Popytki restavratsii", Iskusstvo kommuny, 1918, No.1

But this, Mayakovskii argued when the Party objected to the classics receiving the same short shrift as the counter-revolution, was to be a cleansing fire:

Мы смерть зовем рожденья во имя. (II,22)

This theme was taken up by Punin, Malevich, Kushner and others, all of them insisting also on the necessity for unceasing formal experiment. As Mayakovskii put it:

Есть еще хорошие буквы:

Ер,

Ша,

Ща. (II,14)

For some, it was precisely the innovatory quality of 'left' art that provided its justification as revolutionary. Innovation, it was argued, was by its very nature revolutionary, the aesthetic counterpart to the political revolution.

Shterenberg, the head of IZO, wrote:

If we, destroying the old forms of human culture, created new forms appropriate to new content, we have the right to say that we are doing great revolutionary work.²⁹

29. D.P. Shterenberg, "Kritikam iz proletkul'ta", Iskusstvo kommuny, 1919, No. 10.

Naturally enough, in espousing the revolutionary cause, the 'left' moved rapidly away from the concerns of the bohemian avant-garde. The 'left' acquired a new hero, the industrial worker, a new theoretical basis, dialectical materialism, and a new sense of motivation, the creation of a proletarian art. The self-contained systems of non-objective painting, as also formal experiment as an end in itself, could no longer be justified in the eyes of the politically militant, though a good deal of argument took place on this issue.

Brik, Kushner and Mayakovskii, who together formed the kom-fut (kommunisty-futuristy) group, held that art must perform a practical function in society. In the very first editorial Mayakovskii wrote for Iskusstvo kommuny, the extremely well-known "Priказ po armii iskusstv", Mayakovskii recalled the theme of art on the streets:

На улицы, футуристы,
барабанщики и поэты! (II, I5)

Yet, in contrast to his earlier declaration, the intention behind this call was the creation of an overtly political art:

Товарищи!
На баррикады! -
баррикады сердец и душ. (II, I4)

Art was not the 'senseless caprice' Burlyuk had talked of, but a powerful motivational force, stirring the toiling masses to action:

Это что — корпеть на заводах,
перемазать рожу в копоть,
и роскошь чужую
в отдых
осовелыми глазками хлопать.
Довольно грошовых истин.
Из сердца старое вытри.
Улицы — наши кисти.
Площади — наши палитры. (II, I5)

For Mayakovskii, art was an extension of political activism, an integral and active factor in the struggle for revolutionary change. "What we need", he wrote "is not the dead cathedral of art where dead works languish, but a living factory of the human spirit". (XII, 451) Again this involved only an adjustment to cherished cubo-futurist principles, since agitational art sprang from the same anti-psychologist and anti-realist impulse as the earlier held ideal of art as the deliberate deformation of reality. The devices of futurist art and verse, formerly employed to disrupt perception, now had a positive function in building a bright new future.

The fact of revolution helped also to legitimise futurist anti-aestheticism. The use of folk and popular techniques, the drawing on the traditions of circus, fairground and music hall, obviously had justification when working for a mass audience. The urgency of the political situation made practical demands upon the artist

that Mayakovskii, always ready to smoke art from out of the Ivory Tower, was perfectly willing to fulfil. So, too, the formalist concept of art as a device acquired a workaday meaning. Art could be equated with the products of industrial labour, especially since the device had little to do with meaning and even less with such categories as inspiration and so on. "Art is, simply, work: ability, skill, craftsmanship", in Brik's definition.³⁰

A poetic rendering of precisely this theme is to be found in Mayakovskii's "Poet rabochii", one of the Iskusstvo kommuny poems, in which he declared:

Я тоже фабрика,
А если без труб,
то, может,
мне
без труб труднее. (II,18)

The output of this word works was, obviously, utilitarian, and Mayakovskii appealed to his comrades to join the production team:

Клич футуриста:
были б люди -
искусство приложится. (II,21)

30. O.M. Brik, "Drenazh iskusstvu", Iskusstvo kommuny, 1918, No.1.

In "Poet rabochii" and Brik's article quoted earlier, poet and theoretician can be seen working in tandem, and not for the last time. Brik, however, was prepared to take his ideas one step further than Mayakovskii. For the poet, the appeal to the factory was metaphorical; for Brik it was in every sense literal. Brik wrote:

All artists must quickly, without losing a moment, shake off their ideological drowsiness, open their eyes and begin real creative work. Factories, plants, workshops await the arrival of artists who will produce designs for new, unknown objects.³¹

Brik began his radical restatement of the artist's function by pointing to an absolute division between the cultural requirements of the proletariat, of a materialistic outlook and preferring "flesh, matter, the solid body",³² and the idealistic art products of the bourgeoisie, which served not to create objects, but to reproduce their illusion. The task of art, Brik wrote, was to create "a material object".

Brik's idea proved seminal. His insistence that the new proletarian art should deal with the creation of 'material objects' and be directly linked with industry provided the starting point

31. *ibid.*

32. *ibid.*

for productivism, a movement which wanted to integrate the latest art techniques into the system of mass production. A new image of the artist was beginning to form, as a technologist applying a set of tested techniques in order to achieve finely calculated results. Art terminology changed as well. Talk of the artists as 'prophet' or of art as 'magic', 'inspiration', 'beauty' or 'creation' could be considered only as bourgeois cant, to be superseded by a new, technicist vocabulary. A poet such as Mayakovskii now became a 'skilled worker' (master) who 'processed' 'verbal material'.

CHAPTER

III

FUTURISM AND ITS IDEOLOGICAL OPPONENTS

During the first two years or so of the Revolution, the 'left' faced but one major rival - the Proletkul't. The Proletkul't, or Proletarskie kul'turno-prosvetitel'nye organizatsii, came into being, like SDI, during the brief space of freedom following the February Revolution. The purpose of Proletkul't was to foster the creative potential of the proletariat, to give instruction to working men in the basic skills of artistic self-expression. Studios opened in factories and working class suburbs all over Russia, and so successful was the movement that by 1920, the Proletkul't organisations were claiming a membership of roughly 400,000,¹ while 15 branches were publishing their own periodicals. Proletkul't wielded an organisational clout far in excess of anything the 'left' could muster, though the latter, of course, had the advantage of control of IZO. Both movements claimed to represent 'proletarian' art, Proletkul't through the encouragement of art created by the proletariat, the 'left' through innovatory drive. Argument raged as to which had the better claim.

1. Of this impressive number, only about 20% were reckoned to take an active part in the work of the studios. Proletkul't branches publishing their own journals included Moscow, Petrograd, Orel, Samara, Saratov, Tambov and Tver'. See Ocherki istorii russkoi sovetskoi zhurnalistiki: 1917-1932, Moscow, 1966, pp. 25-39.

As within the Party, matters of policy and administration in this huge movement were tightly controlled from the centre by a nucleus of theoreticians - F. Kalinin, brother of the Soviet President, Bessal'ko, Pletnev and Lebedev-Polyanskii - under the overall leadership of Bogdanov. Proletkul't theory rested on the basic proposition adopted from Marx that art, as a social product, was determined by the social environment in which it was created. Bogdanov noted in addition that art did not function simply as a mirror of social forces, but acted on them. Art was a means of shaping class consciousness and, hence, of active intervention in the class struggle.

At the first All-Russian Conference of Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organisations, i.e. of the Proletkul'ts, held in September 1918, Bogdanov declared:

Art, by means of living images, organises social experience not only in the sphere of aspiration and emotion. As a result, it is the most powerful means of organising collective forces, in a class society - of class forces.²

Consequently, the proletariat required its own, distinctively proletarian art, with the dual function of expressing its world view as a class and

2. A.A. Bogdanov, "Proletariat i iskusstvo", in L.N. Brodskii (ed.) Literaturnye manifesty, vol. 1, Moscow, 1929, p. 130.

organising its forces for the seizure of political power.

According to Proletkul't theory, proletarian art could grow only out of direct experience of the living and working conditions of the working class, so that proletarians alone, though nearly all were culturally unsophisticated, could create such an art. The Proletkul't's first task, then, was to instil the rudiments of culture; to encourage workers to write and paint. Proletkul't theorists set great store by the 'purity' of a proletarian culture free from any 'bourgeois' taint. This same concern for purity led also to demands for autonomy from Soviet institutions. The Proletkul't leadership reacted with indignation when it was suggested that the organisation should come under the aegis of Narkompros. Soviet bodies such as Narkompros were not proletarian enough for Proletkul't:

To place the task of organising the independent cultural creativity of the proletariat under the control and leadership of the ideological representatives of the peasantry, army, cossacks, poor urban petty-bourgeoisie would be, at the least, a great lowering of the cultural dignity of the working class, the denial of its right to

cultural self-determination.³

The Proletkul't leaders also insisted that the organisation should remain free from ideological control by the Party. Bogdanov held a theory of three independent roads to socialism with the Party and trade unions forging a socialist programme in the ideological and economic spheres, while the proletarian cultural organisations set about the creation of socialist art. Lenin had already condemned Bogdanov for ideological heresy in the essay "Materialism i empiriokrititsizm", and the Party was in no mood to tolerate Proletkul't demands for autonomy. Lenin brought the organisation to heel in 1920 by bringing it under the control of Narkompros.

The futurists, too, claimed the right to the title of proletarian artists. As Mayakovskii declared at a public meeting: "Only the proletariat will create the new and only we, the futurists, have a common road with the proletariat".(XII,453). Fierce polemic was

3. Editorial in Proletarskaya kul'tura, 1918, No.3, quoted by N.I. Dikushina in her introduction to Ocherki istorii russkoi / Sovetskoi zhurnalistiki, p.30.

inevitable. Proletkul't ideologists attacked the 'left' as 'bourgeois' and as the antithesis of proletarian art. Not that they were in any way unique in this, for the members of the old revolutionary underground in general lumped Russian with Italian futurism. The movement's emphasis on formal experiment and its bohemianism provoked indignation. Zaum' was dismissed as a manifestation of a supremely anti-proletarian phenomenon - irrationalism, whilst Mayakovskii's liberal use of the first person singular and Kamenskii's extravagant self-advertising were regarded as a form of morbid individualism totally at odds with socialist collectivism. On asking himself the question 'What is futurism?', F.I. Kalinin concluded:

It is a social manifestation of the capitalist order, bourgeois ideology taken to the extreme of its terminal development.⁴

For Kalinin, futurism and proletarian culture were "antipodes". Bessal'ko referred to them as "two sphinxes gazing at each other" in mutual antagonism. "One must destroy the other".⁵ Futurist claims to represent proletarian art were dismissed as spurious, since futurism, "like a chameleon,

4. F.I. Kalinin, "O futurizme", Kalinin and Bessal'ko, Problemy proletarskoi kul'tury, Petrograd, 1919, p.83

5. P. Bessal'ko, "Futurizm i proletarskaya kul'tura", Kalinin and Bessal'ko, op.cit., p.31.

attempts to take on the alien colouring of the revolutionary culture of the proletariat".⁶

The futurists and Proletkul't were, indeed, poles apart in their understanding of the revolutionary artist and the nature of his work. In the Proletkul't view, content, the direct expression of proletarian consciousness and experience was all-important. Mastery of complex formal procedures came very low down the list of priorities.

For the futurists, on the other hand, revolutionary content could not exist without new forms.⁷ The Proletkul't approach was condemned outright for its acceptance of a low level of formal achievement, and, consequently, artistic effectiveness. Futurist polemicists, like Brik and Kushner, were contemptuous of the Proletkul't poets' reliance on the simplest, most hackneyed poetic conventions. As Mayakovskii was to write scornfully, "these writers (from Proletkul't) thought that revolutionariness was exhausted by revolutionary content alone and remained complete reactionaries in the field of form".⁸

6. *ibid.*

7. In one of the many debates held at this time, Mayakovskii noted, with characteristic bluntness, that "the most revolutionary content cannot be revolutionary without a revolutionary approach to the word". XII, 454.

8. V.V. Mayakovskii, "Za chto boretsya Lef?", LEF, 1923, No.1, p.4. (XII, 41)

Given the complexity, difficulty and novelty of futurist art, there were obvious objections to the claims that it represented the interests of a class that was only just emerging from the cultural nursery. Over the years the accusation that 'the workers do not understand futurism' was to be heard with monotonous regularity. The professionalism of the 'left' would permit, however, no concessions towards ease of comprehension. Brik raised this point directly in only the second issue of Iskusstvo kommuny. Proletarian art, "the art of the future", was "not, 'art for proletarians' or 'art by proletarians', but art by artist-proletarians".⁹

Brik defined his artist-proletarian as a man "in whom are merged creative talent and proletarian consciousness".¹⁰ It was the attitude of the creative artist towards the function of his work in society that was significant, not his social origins; not the fact that a new consuming class had come forward. The professional artist, in Brik's scheme, received new motivation and orientation. In contrast to the selfishly motivated bourgeois artist, the artist-proletarian would feel himself a member of a collective, a conscious innovator since this was his social function.

9. O.M. Brik, "Khudozhnik-proletarii", Iskusstvo kommuny, 1918, No.2.

10. *ibid.*

Proletkul't theorists could not accept such a transformation to be possible in a futurist, nor that such a proposal could be made in good faith. Bessal'ko commented:

One cannot talk seriously of literature written by intellectuals as working class literature. One must consider it purely as an attempt by one class to win round, in its own interests, the psychology of another class, to substitute the fake for the real.¹¹

Yet despite the fierce public antipathy, the two competing movements shared important similarities. On a superficial level, both felt sharply the need to create a qualitatively new culture, and held that the art forms of the past could act only as a brake on its development. A poem by the Proletkul't versifier V. Kirillov expresses a sentiment identical to that of Mayakovskii's "Radovat'sya rano", using almost identical imagery:

Во имя нашего Завтра - сожжем Рафаэля,
Разрушим музеи, растопчем искусства цветы.¹²

Similarly, Proletkul't poetry in celebration of industry and labour was, like futurist verse,

11. P. Bessal'ko, op. cit., p.32. Substituting the fake, illusionism, for the real was of course precisely what Brik accused traditional art forms of doing.

12. V. Kirillov, "My", quoted by V. Pertsov in Mayakovskii; zhizn' i tvorchestvo. Posle Velikoi OKtyabr'skoi Sotsialisticheskoi revolyutsii, Moscow, 1956, p.531

anti-psychologist and anti-realist. More importantly, futurists and Proletkul't shared a vision of art as an integral part of daily experience, of the penetration of art into the life and labour of the masses. It is not difficult to see Bogdanov's idea of art as the 'organiser of social experience' at work in the theories Mayakovskii's colleagues Chuzhak and Tret'yakov put forward during the early 'twenties.

In the months following the October Revolution attempts were made by the futurists to come to terms with the proletarian organisations, though all such overtures were rebuffed by Proletkul't.¹³ Brik and

13. Mayakovskii, apparently, had even attended the founding conference of Proletkul't in June 1917. He was one of only three professional artists to attend. This first contact did not augur well for the future. Mayakovskii was irritated by a pedantic insistence on such details as that the creation of revolutionary art required party membership on the part of its creators. The proletarians were equally unimpressed by Mayakovskii's support for the idea that the new movement should be called 'Art and Socialism'. "Worker-writers cannot conceive of art without socialism", noted the proletarian poet Sadof'ev, "and so this suggestion, together with Mayakovskii's cooperation, was turned down". See, V.A. Katanyan, Mayakovskii. Literaturnaya Khronika, Moscow, 1961, pp.87 & 442.

Mayakovskii spoke at the All-Russian Proletkul't Conference held in September 1918, but made little impression.¹⁴ In the provinces, however, the situation may have been different. Early in 1919 a combined group of 'left' and proletarian writers in the Ukraine called for an end to the bickering.¹⁵ Public dissension, it was recognised, at least by the 'left', helped noone, especially during the desperate struggle for survival then taking place. The fault, the 'left' felt, lay

14. One rather curious reaction to Mayakovskii's speech came from Bessal'ko. He recounted how Mayakovskii had "confessed before all our comrades that he reads Pushkin at night". A fine case of futurist hypocrisy, indeed! See Bessal'ko, op. cit., p.34.
15. This appeal came from a group calling itself the Literary Committee of the All-Ukrainian Soviet of the Arts and was signed by two poets; the zaumnik Grigorii Petnikov who had befriended Khlebnikov in Khar'kov and Aleksandr Gastev, one of the most original of all the Proletkul't poets and perhaps the only one to betray a genuine enthusiasm for futurist experimentalism. Collaboration between young enthusiasts of 'left' art and Proletkul'tists was possibly widespread. Zinov'ev is reported to have said as much at the Proletkul't Conference of 1919, when after lamenting that futurism had all but been given official recognition, he went on: "We permitted these doubtful elements to worm their way into our Proletkul'ts. We must put an end to it.. Let us have a little more proletarian simplicity in our art". Zinov'ev, quoted by N.F. Chuzhak, "Opasnost' arakcheevshchiny", Tvorchestvo, Vladivostok, 1920. No.5, p.79.

with Proletkul't, for amongst the members of this organisation there were "too many non-proletarian, in general non-artists, in any case non-creative artists".¹⁶ One solution was for the 'left' to make its own bid for support from the workers, and in January 1919 the kom-fut organisation was launched in Petrograd.

Kom-fut grew out of Brik and Mayakovskii's visits to the factories and working men's clubs of Petrograd during the bitter winter of 1918. Brik lectured on the new art and poetry, while Mayakovskii recited his verse and extracts from his play "Misteriya-buff". Their audiences divided, naturally enough, between enthusiasts and the sceptical, among the former several members of the Vyborg district branch of the RKP (b). In December 1918 Iskusstvo kommuny published a letter from one of these enthusiastic comrades, the worker Mushtakov, who wrote that:

The proletariat needs an art born of the factories, plants and streets, which should be in spirit the thundering art of struggle. It exists. It is futurism.¹⁷

The futurists responded quickly to this testimonial, and within two months Iskusstvo kommuny

16. Unsigned editorial, "Edinenie", Iskusstvo kommuny, 1919, No.14.

17. Mushtakov, "Oktyabr' v iskusstve", Iskusstvo kommuny, 1918, No.2.

could announce the formation of the kom-fut collective under the auspices of the Vyborg district branch of the Communist Party, with Kushner as chairman and Brik responsible for cultural ideology.¹⁸

The purpose of kom-fut was both to counter the influence of Proletkul't and also to reshape the conservative attitudes towards art of the majority of Party cadres, a propos of whom Brik remarked caustically that "99 per cent of political dictators turn out to be the most blatant compromisers when it comes to cultural construction."¹⁹ It was intended that kom-fut would act as a Party cultural school, with a programme of lectures embracing art and politics. By training a nucleus of Party members with at least a modicum of cultural sophistication, it was hoped that kom-fut could effectively help swing Party policies behind the 'left'. An optimistic assumption, but kom-fut's aims could never be put to the test, since the Vyborg Party Committee refused even to register kom-fut as a Party collective. Such a

18. In the cumbersome phraseology of the time, Brik was to be responsible for the "direction of the school of cultural communist ideology". See "Kommunisty-futuristy", Iskusstvo kommuny, 1919, No.8. Since Mayakovskii was not a Party member, he was not officially a member of kom-fut.

19. O.M. Brik, "Dovol'no soglashatel'stva", Iskusstvo kommuny, 1919, No. 6 0

step would have created a precedent. The name lived on, but simply as an alternative name for Mayakovskii's small band of politically committed futurists.²⁰

The rejection by the Vyborg Party Committee was symptomatic of a general hostility in Party circles towards futurism; a hostility caused to a large extent by the 'left's' claim to represent proletarian art.²¹ As early as December 1981

Commissar Lunacharskii felt it necessary to publicly repudiate the line followed by Iskusstvo kommuny, which since it was published by IZO Narkomprosa could easily be regarded as a mouthpiece of official policy. Two attitudes of the 'left' troubled Lunacharskii; the rejection of the past and the tendency to claim official sanction. The first

20. One of the few documents to give an indication of who the 'kom-futs' were is the copy of the poem "150,000,000" Mayakovskii presented to Lenin. The copy bears the inscription "With kom-fut greetings" and was signed by Mayakovskii, Brik, Lilya Brik, Kushner, Boris Malkin, Shterenberg and Al'tman.

21. To the veterans of the revolutionary underground some of the statements of the 'left' must have seemed the height of opportunistic impertinence, such as this by Punin: "We wish to see our October achieved, we wish to assert the dictatorship of the minority, since it is only the minority, and the creative one at that, which has sufficiently powerful muscles to march in step with the working class".

N.N. Punin, "Levye - pravye", Iskusstvo kommuny, 1918, No.3

was epitomised by Mayakovskii's "Radovat'sya rano" and totally contracted^d the Party's belief in cultural continuity.²² As to the second, Lunacharskii gave the 'left' its due for supporting the Soviet regime. "The futurists", he admitted "were the first to come to the help of the revolution".²³ Nevertheless, Lunacharskii emphasised that the Party was not prepared to give its official blessing to any sectarian group, nor was the time ripe for a definitive statement of aesthetics, a statement which would scarcely have favoured the 'left' in any case. The 'left' remained defiant, but soon they were to face opposition from within the Party and from circles much less benevolent than Lunacharskii.

22. Lunacharskii published his remarks in Iskusstvo kommuny. He omitted a long section attacking Mayakovskii personally for the bad taste of his public attitudes in which he wrote: "I am delighted that this talent has turned to revolutionary content, but I am painfully shocked, I wince with embarrassment when I hear the rumble of booming self-advertisement..."
A. V. Lunacharskii, "Lozhka protivoyadiya", Sobranie sochinenii, vol. II, p. 207.

23. *ibid.*, p. 208.

The Bolshevik Party, preoccupied with the creation and consolidation of the revolution, had little time to devote to the arts and to the formulation of a marxist aesthetics. The efforts of the 'left' to remedy this deficiency were not, however, welcomed. Articles in popular marxist journals described futurism in the blackest terms and even employed the smear tactics of the gutter press. Mayakovskii's cubo-futurists were lumped together with ego-futurists and Shershenevich's imaginists: Russian futurism was described as the epigone of the Italian movement. Futurism, the argument ran, could by its very nature have nothing in common with the revolutionary proletariat, leaving aside the fact that futurist poetry was incomprehensible anyway. As one commentator wrote:

What is there in common between futurist tricks and pretensions ..., calculated to satisfy the rotten tastes of bourgeois degenerates ... (and displayed) on the stage of their Moscow night-club, and the genuine peasant and working-class masses with their spiritual needs, psychology and tastes? Absolutely nothing!²⁴

The Moscow Soviet published directives urging a halt to the publication of futurist books, and

24. A. Evgen'ev, "Futuristicheskaya Gekuba i proletariat", Vestnik literatury, Moscow, 1919, No. 10, p.4. See also V. Kryazhin, "Futurizm i revolyutsiya", Vestnik zhizni, Moscow, 1919, No. 6-7.

also those of the Proletkul't. The organ of the Soviet , Izvestiya, refused to carry any advertising from either grouping.

57 The tone of the response in Party circles to futurism was set at the very top by Lenin himself. He could muster no enthusiasm either for futurist verse or 'left' art.²⁵ His personal literary tastes were heavily biased towards the great Russian realists, and it was out of this tradition, he felt, that the new socialist art would emerge. He was clearly disconcerted by the novelty and stridency of Mayakovskii's verse, and the same applied to non-objectivist 'left' art.²⁶

Such an attitude, and one widely shared in the upper reaches of the Party, could not but have

25. To Klara Tsetkin Lenin remarked: "I cannot consider the works of expressionism, futurism, cubism or any other 'ism' as the highest manifestation of human genius. I do not understand them. I experience no joy from them". K. Tsetkin, "Vospominaniya o Lenine", in V.I. Lenin o literature i iskusstve, Moscow, 1969, p.663.

26. See N.K. Krupskaya, "Chto nrazilos' Il'ichu iz khudozhestvennoi literatury", V.I. Lenin o literature i iskusstve, p.629 and A.V. Lunacharskii, "Lenin i iskusstvo", op. cit., p.667. For a general account in English on Lenin's attitude towards Mayakovskii see Peter Reddaway's article "Literature, the Arts and the Personality of Lenin", in Schapiro and Reddaway, Lenin: the Man, the Theorist, the Leader, London, 1967.

important practical effects. The Party restricted the influence and activities of the 'left' as much as possible. The initial successes of the 'left' were reversed as the artistic 'right', with official encouragement, began to recover confidence. In April 1919 Iskusstvo kommuny ceased publication, and the 'left' blamed the growing power of the traditionalists for its demise:

The academicians, gradually disillusioned that Soviet power was not to be a nine days' wonder, began, singly and in groups, to knock at the doors of the People's Commissariats.

Not daring to use them for responsible work, the Soviet authorities offered them, or more accurately those of them with a European reputation, cultural and educational backyards.

From these backyards the left began to be badgered, culminating brilliantly in the closure of Iskusstvo kommuny.²⁷

In July of the same year IMO, too, was closed, so depriving the 'left' and Mayakovskii's group in particular of independent means of publication.

27. V.V. Mayakovskii, "Za chto boretsya Lef?", LEF, 1923, No.1, p.5. ^(XII, 42) The official explanation was that the paper closed because of an acute paper shortage.

The IMO episode and its aftermath amply illustrate the difficulties in the relationship between the futurists and the Party, which showed a distinct lack of inclination to assist its would-be allies. In May 1919 all publishing enterprises were nationalised by government decree, and a single state publishing house, Gosizdat, established. Responsibility for IMO thus passed out of the hands of Lunacharskii. When Brik, Jakobson and Mayakovskii applied to Lunacharskii early in July 1919 for additional subsidies in order to complete IMO's quota of twelve titles, Lunacharskii could only hand over their request to the Gosizdat editorial board with a note indicating his personal support for IMO. The Gosizdat board decided, however, that the time had come to withdraw state support for IMO. Having agreed to meet all outstanding royalty commitments,²⁸ Gosizdat proceeded to wind up Mayakovskii's publishing house. One Soviet source admits that the reason for the decision was not economic. Distribution arrangements for the projected titles had already been made, so that the costs of publication could, as with earlier IMO editions, have been met in advance. "The basic reason" for the refusal of subsidy was, Dinershtein asserts, "the sharply negative attitude" of the Gosizdat

28. Among the recipients of these royalties were Khlebnikov and Pasternak.

board "to so-called 'left' art".²⁹ The members of the board, V.V. Vorovskii, I.I. Skvortsov-Stepanov and M.N. Pokrovskii, all belonged to the older generation of revolutionaries and shared Lenin's mistrust for anything smacking of futurism.

This prejudice was to bedevil all Mayakovskii's dealings with Gosizdat. Just a year after the IMO episode, the state publishing house accepted Mayakovskii's long poem "150,000,000" for publication, though only with the greatest reluctance, and then proceeded to hold back on fulfilling its commitment.

29. E.A. Dinershtein, "Izdatel'skaya deyatel'nost' V.V. Mayakovskogo", op. cit., p.163.

Mayakovskii had made his own arrangements for distribution through the head of the state distribution agency, Boris Malkin. So efficient was Malkin that the Tambov Proletkul't journal Gryadushchaya kul'tura complained: "Of course, the broad masses of the proletariat in the provinces still have not heard of futurism, but politically conscious workers, particularly those with an interest in art, are already becoming acquainted with it. It goes without saying that neither Iskusstvo kommuny nor futurist agitators, who have filtered through to the provinces in insignificant numbers as yet, are responsible. The contracting agency of the VTsIK (Malkin's organisation - FW) is working for them by distributing large quantities of futurist literature to railway stations". Dinershtein, op. cit., p.162.

The poem, which had been endorsed by the symbolist poet Valerii Bryusov, then head of LITTO - the literary equivalent of IZO, as a work of "exceptional agitational significance" worthy of publication "at the earliest possible moment",³⁰ languished in Gosizdat's bureaucratic machinery until April 1921.

Mayakovskii, understandably, was furious at the delay as also at the size of the print order, which Gosizdat had set at 5,000 copies. So, too, was Lenin, but for very different reasons. In a note to Lunacharskii, Lenin raged:

Aren't you ashamed of yourself voting for the publication of Mayakovskii's "150,000,000" in an edition of 5,000 copies?

Rubbish, stupidity, arrant stupidity and pretentiousness.

In my opinion only one in ten of this sort of thing should be published, and not more than 1500 copies for libraries and eccentrics.

And horsewhip Lunacharskii for futurism.³¹

This was not the first time that Lunacharskii had been accused of being almost a crypto-futurist,

30. Bryusov's recommendation, quoted in Mayakovskii, XIII, 307.

31. V.I. Lenin o literature i iskusstve, p.493. Emphasis in original.

a charge he felt he scarcely deserved.³²

Certainly, his responsibility as People's Commissar forced him to walk a difficult tightrope. Ardent supporters of the Bolsheviks, such as many of the 'left' were, were not easy to find in artistic circles. Also, Lunacharskii was personally convinced of the artistic merit of much of the work by the leading futurists and 'left' artists. However, he felt himself bound to condemn as un-marxist the theoretical assumptions that underpinned this work, while the efforts of the 'left' particularly kom-fut, to speak as cultural ideologists caused him acute embarrassment. Lunacharskii's criticism of the 'left', at first comparatively mild, gradually sharpened. Finally in November 1920, in the heat of a public discussion of a Meirikhof production which had thrown the public into dismay with its non-objectivist suprematist sets, Lunacharskii was heard to remark:

Futurism is dead. It already stinks. It is only three days in the grave, I agree, but it stinks and there's no point in

32. At one Party gathering Lunacharskii was accused to his face of being a futurist himself, to which he could only reply: "I never was a futurist, am not a futurist and will not become a futurist". Lunacharskii, quoted by R.A. Lavrov, "Zapiski Lenina po dokladu Lunacharskogo na III sessii VTsIK 7-go sozyva, (26-27 sentyabrya 1920g.)", V.I. Lenin i A.V. Lunacharskii, Literaturnoe nasledstvo, vol. LXXX, Moscow, 1971, p.652.

looking for some sort of Picasso of the proletariat.³³

Lunacharskii did his utmost to persuade the 'left' artists to break with their insistence on pursuing the modernist experiment, to break with theory:

I only wish our 'left' ... comrades would grasp the simple fact that 'leftishness' in art is the fruit of the unhealthy atmosphere of the boulevards of bourgeois Paris and the cafes of bourgeois Munich, that this futurism with its preaching of non-objectivism, of pure formalism, with its affectations ... accompanied by a staggering monotony of devices - that all this is the product of the disintegration of bourgeois culture.³⁴

Even while attacking futurism, however, Lunacharskii would still argue the case of individual futurists. In February 1921, for example, he personally recommended an agitational play by Kamenskii of admittedly

33. Quoted in "Vokrug 'futurizma v teatre'", Tvorchestvo, Chita, 1921, No.7, p.115.

34. A.V. Lunacharskii, "Moim opponentam", Sobranie sochinenii, vol. II, p.230. Lunacharskii constantly accused the 'left' theorists of leading their artist colleagues astray, literally arguing that if only the theorists would keep quiet, the work of Mayakovskii and the others would set itself automatically on a correct course, ridding itself of 'futurist excess' and moving back toward greater realism.

dubious merit to Lenin.³⁵

Lunacharskii's appeals to the 'left' to abandon their goal of formally revolutionary art fell on deaf ears. But by the end of 1920 the Party had made a decision to intervene; on December 1 a Central Committee directive appeared in Pravda aimed at curbing the ambitions of Proletkul't. The Proletkul't, the Central Committee decreed, had no right to claim autonomy, and it was to be brought under the ideological control of the Party while becoming organisationally a party of Narkompros. But the directive also put paid to any lingering hopes that the 'left' entertained of recognition for itself, since the Central Committee was concerned to root out in Proletkul't the influence of Bogdanov's theories and also those of the 'left'. According to the Central Committee:

Futurists, decadents, adherents of idealistic philosophy hostile to marxism and, finally, simple failures and elements from the ranks of bourgeois journalism and philosophy have begun here and there

35. Kamenskii's play, "Parovoznaya obednya", was even reviewed by Lunacharskii in Izvestiya. The play, Lunacharskii considered, was "not a masterpiece, but as the first work in a clearly communist, propagandist and productive spirit it is fairly successful". See V.I. Lenin i A.V. Lunacharskii, p. 494.

to take over in the Prolektul'ts. ...

In art the workers have been inculcated
with stupid, perverted tastes (futurism).³⁶

Just the day before this directive was published, Mayakovskii had angrily rejected Lunacharskii's jibe at futurism's putrid corpse. "If everything 'left' compromises you", Mayakovskii wrote, "then destroy TEO with Meierkhol'd, ban MUZO with the futurist Art. Lur'e, break up IZO with Shterenberg, shut the VKhUTEMAS ...".(XII,18) The directive had precisely that effect, at least in the visual arts. Within days conservatively inclined students at VKhUTEMAS protested to the Central Committee at the active discouragement of realist art in the VKhUTEMAS teaching programme, and also at the support afforded to the 'left' by IZO.³⁷

The realist students demanded the right to follow courses of their own choosing, independently of the programme of 'production art' adopted at the school and by IZO. After a year of bitter infighting during which Lunacharskii maintained a stance of impartiality, the question had still not been finally settled, but the hegemony of the 'left' had been irrevocably broken. From then on the 'left'

36. "Pis'mo TsK RKP 'O proletkul'tkah", V.I.Lenin o literature i iskusstve, p. 595.

37. For a full account see L.M. Khlebnikov. "Bor'ba realistov i futuristov vo VKhUTEMAS", V.I. Lenin i A.V. Lunacharskii, pp.704-719.

, professors in VKhUTEMAS, as in the broader arena of Soviet art, were forced to fight a steadily losing battle against the adherents of the Russian tradition of social realism.

CHAPTER
IV

THE DEATH OF EASEL ART

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By the end of 1920 it was apparant that the 'left' art movement was breaking up. The simple fact of experimentalism could no longer hold it together, and a split developed between the 'pure' artists, who retained a belief in the viability of the traditional media of painting and sculpture, and the production artists, who regarded such forms of artistic expression as redundant. The seeds of this division had been sown in the very first issue of Iskusstvo kommuny by Brik. He argued, as did Kushner, that the artist's work, if conceived as the manipulation of devices, was a craft analogous with any other form of skilled labour. Like any skilled labourer, the artist's task was to make useful objects. Indeed, in this article, entitled *explan!* [a] "^aDrenzh iskusstvu", Brik argued that the creation of material objects formed the artist's sole field of action in the building of socialism, not the communication of ideas.¹

1. Brik's refusal to recognise any ideational function in art has obvious parallels with Jakobson's disparagement of content in literature. See p.37.

This view was later modified by the 'left' ideologists Arvatov and Chuzhak who held that the new art must dedicate itself to the creation of ide^ological as much as material values.

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15 Brik's suggestion did not meet with any great enthusiasm. The painter Ivan Puni (Jean Pougny) replied that the artist had no place in industry; the principle¹ of the aesthetic and of the utilitarian were irreconcilable. Furthermore, the artist could scarcely hope to influence industrial culture when he himself had derived inspiration from it. "Utility", he wrote "will create beauty and beauty will create us artists".² Puni's remarks sparked off a lively debate, with the editorial board coming out in favour of Brik. The ultimate goal, one editorial proclaimed, was to create a synthesis of art and industrial labour, to destroy the concept of art as free creativity and to liberate labour from the slavery of the production line:

Art strives toward conscious creation, production toward the mechanical. The need for special, conscious creativity, for art, diminishes to the degree in which the unconscious productive process becomes conscious. Production and art merge into one conscious whole; creativity and work merge into conscious labour.³

2. I. Puni, "Tvorchestvo zhizni", Iskusstvo kommuny, 1919, No. 5.

3. Iskusstvo kommuny, 1919, No. 8.

Brik sacrificed the spiritual superiority of the artist, which was, in any case, he argued, spurious, for a much greater need: the redemption of industrial labour. Easel painting, the mark of the bourgeois artist's social alienation and superfluity, was redundant. A little later, Arvatov noted that artists of 'left' and 'right' tendencies alike had failed to take in this important message; both "capitulated equally before the demand to merge the tasks of artistic creation with those of social reconstruction".⁴

By the summer of 1920 IZO had adopted production art as official policy. Indeed, some two years earlier, an industrial art sub-section had been established on the initiative of Olga Rozanova. This sub-section had promoted the training of workers and the provision of state aid for those industries in which the artist had a place by tradition - ceramics, woodwork, textile design, printing and so on - in order to encourage good design of mass-produced consumer goods.

Though adopted by IZO, the production art policy attracted few artists. Interest in formal experiment was still strong, and besides, there

4. B.I. Arvatov, "Izobrazitel 'noe iskusstvo v gody revolyutsii", Pechat' i revolyutsiya, Moscow, 1922, No. 7, p.144.

were scarcely any materials available.⁵ Theory ran far ahead of practice, for it was not until some three years after Brik put forward his suggestion that artists began seriously to work on the synthesis of art and industry. Ironically enough, progress towards this goal came not from within the production art movement, but from experiments in 'pure' art.

For most 'left' artists it was sufficient, axiomatic even, to associate the revolutionary in art with formal experiment, 'laboratory' work. Analytical abstraction predominated. In 1918 Malevich seemingly took painting to its logical conclusion when he exhibited his canvas "White on White". Rodchenko countered with "Black on Black". By 1919, it was reported,

5. A report from Rabkrin, a government body created to check corruption and maladministration, when called in to inspect the working of the VKhUTEMAS found that the school's production art bias did not correspond with the students' actual interests. Thus, in February 1921 out of an enrolment of 1670, only 127 students wanted to study in the applied art faculties. Altogether these students barely outnumbered their teachers, while in the metal work department two students had no less than seven teachers all to themselves. This department, along with two others, was scarcely able to function in any case because of ^{a lack of} materials, accomodation and equipment. See L.M.Khlebnikov, op. cit., p.711

suprematism had triumphed in Moscow, while in 1920 its influence spread to Vitebsk when Malevich took over as head of the Vitebsk art schools from Chagall. Suprematism reduced painting to its simplest elements; geometric forms coloured black or red on plain grounds. It was a celebration of painting recognised as formal convention, but it could also be used for agitational purpose. El' Lissitzkii's poster "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge" is a classic both of suprematist art and of revolutionary poster design. Suprematism's simple forms and vivid colours found instant application in applied art, particularly ceramics. But suprematism, particularly as conceived by Malevich, remained alien to the utilitarianism of the 'left' theoreticians. Malevich's paintings, drawings and lithographs express a vision of the new world in cosmic terms and explore the harmonies of an idealised future. Intuition and imagination were more important than reason and practicality.

Yet suprematism proved a vital step in the gradual acceptance of the ideas put forward by Brik, since it acted as a method for precisely calculating colour and spatial relationships and also by seeming to bring the activity of painting to a dead end. Some artists, like Rodchenko, passed through analytical abstraction in order later to reject its isolation from the immediacies

of the political situation, but even on them the exercise of working in the simplest abstract forms left its mark in a new, minimalist visual language readily applicable in a utilitarian context.

The possibilities of suprematism in the field of applied art were recognised by Punin, though from him this was no compliment. Punin, like many others on the 'left', felt that suprematism had placed itself in a creative dead-end.⁶ The way forward, he observed, was to be found in the work of Tatlin. Before October 1917 Tatlin had achieved notoriety for his so-called 'counter-reliefs'. Adopting the slogan of 'real materials in real space', Tatlin had synthesised the media of painting and sculpture by combining in the painter's wall area such non-painterly materials as wood, metal, glass and other objects to create three-dimensional reliefs, which hung on walls or projected from corners.

After the Revolution, Tatlin took his experiment one stage further, resolving to create a synthesis of artistic and utilitarian forms. The result was his "Monument to the Third International", a triumph of the artist's vision expressed through the techniques and materials of the engineer. More than any other single work Tatlin's monument

6. See N. Punin, "Pis'mo iz Moskvyy", Iskusstvo kommuny, 1919, No. 10.

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+ embodies the ambitions and dreams of the 'left' artists. The Monument was designed in the form of a huge spiral tower, constructed of iron girders, with a glass cylinder, cone and cube suspended within the framework. These smaller structures were conceived as meeting halls for State and Party functions. This tower, Tatlin declared, was a "union of purely artistic forms (painting, sculpture, architecture) for a utilitarian purpose".⁷ In its structural materials, iron and glass, and in its intended function as an administrative and propaganda centre it was absolutely contemporary, while in its ~~assymetrical~~^{asymmetrical}, soaring form, the tower suggested relentless movement forward into the future. At the time Punin wrote of it:

The form of the monument corresponds to all art forms invented at the present moment. In accordance with the contemporary situation in art these forms are obviously of the simplest: cube, cylinder, sphere, cone, segments, curved surfaces and their sectors etc. As a principle it must be asserted; firstly that the elements of the monument are all modern

7. V. Tatlin, quoted by Camilla Gray, The Russian Experiment in Art, New York, 1971, p. 255.

machinery aiding agitation and propoganda, and, secondly, that the monument is a place of the most intensive movement. Least of all could one stand or sit in it: one should be carried up, down, be attracted against one's will, the strong laconic phrase of the orator-agitator should flash out - and also the latest decree, decision, invention, the rush of simple and clear thought, creativity, only creativity.⁸

Tatlin's marrying of art and engineering, his fascination with industrial materials, as also his willingness to bring an artist's eye to bear on practical problems,⁹ inspired a whole group of artists - the constructivists. "The constructivists", Boris Arvatov was to write, "declared that the basic, even the only, aim of art was the creative processing of real materials. They broadened the field of the artist's skills by introducing into easel composition a whole range of materials other than colour, which had previously been thought to be 'non-aesthetic' - stone, tin, wood, glass, wire, etc."¹⁰

8. N.N.Punin, "O pamyatnikakh", Iskusstvo kommuny, 1919, No. 14.

9. During those cold, hungry years Tatlin designed a stove, so economic that it was called a burzhuika.

10. B.I. Arvatov, Iskusstvo i klassy, Moscow, 1923, p.39.

The Constructivists did not immediately launch into utilitarianism. In its formative days Constructivism was itself a 'laboratory' movement. Between the publication of the first constructivist manifestoes in 1920¹¹ and late 1921, the Constructivists experimented primarily with abstract forms, strikingly demonstrated in the free-standing, geometric sculptures, which resembled engineers' models for objects with an as yet unknown purpose, at the Obmokhu exhibition in May 1921. Easel painting was declared finished and a synthesis proposed between art and technology. In adopting the methods and materials of the engineer, the Constructivists opened up the possibility for a direct, creative relationship between art and industry. Nevertheless, for the social utilitarians like Arvatov and Brik, Constructivism, though seeking to establish new artistic working methods rooted in contemporary social and industrial forms, yet remained imprisoned in a world of self-sufficient forms, in 'pure' art. The necessary change, as

11. Two separate groups published manifestoes in 1920: the brothers Anton Pevsner and Naum Gabo pasted up their misleadingly titled "Realistic manifesto" around Moscow, while the First Workers' Group of Constructivists, initially comprising the Stenberg brothers, Medunetskii and, later, Rodchenko, issued their statement from the Kafe Pittoresk.

Arvatov observed with satisfaction, was not long in coming:

In 1921 ... at a meeting of the Institute of Artistic Culture in Moscow more than 20 of Russia's best artists unanimously resolved to break with self-sufficient easel forms and take steps to ensure the speedy entry of artists into production.

Easel art had died with the society that begat it.¹²

12. B.I. Arvatov, Iskusstvo i klassy, p.41.

CHAPTER

V

ART AND COMMITMENT: AGITPROP 1919 - 1921

In 1919, after eighteen months of verse-writing and speech-making on behalf of the revolution, Mayakovskii suddenly almost totally abandoned writing, turning back to the brushes and paints he had laid aside some ten years earlier. Frustration may have played its part, since in July Gosizdat neatly sabotaged all his best efforts with IMO. But opportunity beckoned as well.

In August 1919, hand-drawn posters lampooning the enemies of the Revolution appeared in the empty and dusty windows of the once-fashionable shops of Moscow's Tverskoi Boulevard. They were the work of Mikhail Cheremnykh, an old friend of Mayakovskii's from his days at art school, who had persuaded the Soviet news agency, ROSTA, that here was an excellent chance to make effective propoganda and cover over an eyesore as well.¹ In October, Mayakovskii, much impressed by some ROSTA windows he had seen, asked to join the studio, and from then until the beginning of 1922 he turned out a stream of posters.

Stress the irony of this?

1. ROSTA itself was headed by a leading member of Proletkul't, P.M. Kerzhentsev, who also served as a deputy editor of Izvestiya. Early in 1921 the ROSTA studio became part of the agitational wing of Narkompros, Glavpolitprosvet.

Mayakovskii threw himself into the work with characteristic fervour. Out of a total of just over two thousand satirical windows, he is credited with roughly a quarter of the designs and no less than 85% of the texts.² The main burden of the work of the studio was shouldered by a group of three - Cheremnykh, Mayakovskii and Malyutin, though many others helped, including the Briks and the constructivist Anton Lavinskii.³

Mayakovskii, one Soviet researcher comments, "was the soul of the whole business".⁴ He dominated and inspired the work of the studio, determining the general character of the satirical and political line followed in the posters. Through continuous collective work a general, highly distinctive, artistic style evolved, without, however, destroying the individual manner of each artist. The posters make for a vivid, if one-sided, view of the ebb and flow of the Civil War, of the crises in agriculture and industry.

2. See V.D. Duvakin's article, "Okna ROSTA i Glavpolitprosveta" in Mayakovskii, III, 469-479.

3. Duvakin also mentions the futurist poet Sergei Tret'yakov as being involved, and Mayakovskii himself mentioned the imaginist, and former futurist, Vadim Shershenevich, XIII, 34.

4. Duvakin, op. cit., p.473.

The windows celebrated victories, ridiculed the White generals and their Entente allies, exhorted and agitated. Mayakovskii would compose a text on the basis of news reports as they came into the ROSTA offices, responding immediately to urgent events with arresting images and slogans.

The need to keep pace with the rapid flow of events largely determined the choice of hand-produced posters as a medium, for by the time a poster could be printed by conventional techniques, if a press could be found in working order, the news was stale, the agitational urgency lost. Hand-drawn posters also gave the artists greater stylistic freedom and in the use of colour. In place of the conventional press, the ROSTA studio used crude, though effective means of reproduction. Initially artists, often VKhUTEMAS students, simply copied the originals. Then, early in 1920 production switched to stencils, also hand-cut, from which up to 300 copies would be run off for distribution to provincial ROSTA branches. Later on, the stencils themselves were distributed for running off copies locally.

During 1920 and 1921 Mayakovskii's work on the ROSTA satirical windows absorbed most of his energy.

Brik recalled:

In those years Mayakovskii did not feel up to literary and artistic disputes. He sometimes spoke in public in order to propagandise 'left' art, but this was not his chief concern. Literary battles were not commensurate with the grandiose class battles of the Civil War.⁵

Only when the pressures of war subsided, rendering the ROSTA windows redundant, did Mayakovskii turn once more to matters of organisation.

Brik described the ROSTA period as a turning point in Mayakovskii's artistic development, for in this work the poet realised the slogans he had himself advanced in Iskusstvo kommuny. Art entered a truly mass arena to tackle urgent political problems. The ROSTA windows provided practical proof that paintings were "now irrelevant".⁶ The vaunted superiority of pure art was exposed as a sham through the inability of such art to make an effective contribution to the needs of the revolution.

5. O.M. Brik, "Mayakovskii - redaktor i organizator", op. cit., p. 125.

6. A.M. Nyurenberg, one of Mayakovskii's colleagues at ROSTA, quotes this remark in his recollections of an encounter between Mayakovskii and a group of realist artists at which Mayakovskii lambasted the realists for the pathetic inadequacy of painting. Painting, the poet said, was condemned to respond passively rather than actively joining the forces of social change. See N.V. Reformatskaya (ed.), V.V. Mayakovskii v vospominaniyakh sovremennikov, Moscow, 1963, p. 204.

Mayakovskii himself attached great significance to this period of his work, during which he spared no effort, without thought for posterity, on ephemera which have survived purely by chance. The ROSTA windows, he wrote later, were a form of work which "stripped our language of poetic peel in themes which could not permit verbosity". (XIII, 208). The composition at high speed of verse texts sharpened an already agile satirical talent, enabling the poet to achieve maximum expressiveness with a remarkable economy of means, if at the expense of subtlety.

Mayakovskii's tackling of specific issues in the ROSTA windows is in contrast with the more generalised, romanticised even, political statements of his first post-October poems such as "Nash marsh", "Levyi marsh" or the large-scale work "Misteriya-buff". This kind of social and political work was, the futurists persistently claimed, by no means an inferior literary form, for it demanded as much care in the selection of appropriate themes, forms and devices in order to achieve effectiveness as agitation, as traditionally conceived imaginative literature. There was no inherent qualitative difference between socially utilitarian art and art conceived for purely aesthetic effect, since the creative act was no more than the application of technique for a given purpose. As Brik put it:

There is no 'pure' and 'impure' art ...

The only difference between a picture and a signboard is that they are different things, not that they are the products of two different kinds of activity of which one is 'pure' and the other 'impure'.

If the poet writes agit jingles, investing all his creative ingenuity, then it is by no means hack-work, but real art.⁷

This attitude of Brik's remains firmly within the context of formalist thinking. Though the function of the artistic work was now conceived in strictly utilitarian terms, the creative process was still conceived as simply the construction of a system of verbal or visual devices and materials. There could thus be no qualitative difference between composing a text for a political poster or writing a love poem. This use of formalism to destroy traditional aesthetic categories and posit a new social function of art did not always meet with the approval of Brik's formalist friends. Shklovskii later described Brik's procedure as an illegitimate use of a critical method designed "not to dethrone but to dissect".⁸

7. O.M. Brik, "Esteticheskaya ugolovshchina", Ermitazh, Moscow, 1922, No. 2, p.8.

8. V.B. Shklovskii, "O Mayakovskom", Zhyli-byli, Moscow, 1966, p.384. The full flavour of Shklovskii's pun, " мы произведения не развенчиваем, а развинчиваем ", is unfortunately lost in translation.

1.e. proletkult
art!

The theoretical formulation of the anti-aesthetic was accompanied by increasing use of popular forms. In part this was directly conditioned by the needs of the audience, such as in the agitational verse Mayakovskii wrote for the villages. In other cases, such as Mayakovskii's own "150,000,000" or the work of the 'left' theatre directors, especially Eizenshtein,⁹ the motivation was rooted in a more self-conscious desire to revitalise the artist's stock of material with sources previously despised as uncouth. Obviously the fact that the revolution was held to be proletarian also played its part. The anti-aesthetic also helped win acceptance for the idea of transforming the imaginative writer into political journalist.

Commission

Brik found a suitably laconic formulation for this last aspect in his concept of the 'social command' - 'sotsial'nyi zakaz'. Literature and art,

9. Perhaps the most spectacular example was Eizenshtein's production "Mudrets" - script by Tret'yakov, based on Ostrovskii's "Na vsyakogo mudretsa dovol'no prostoty". Eizenshtein's production rolled together elements of music hall and the circus, including tightrope walking, to build up a fast-moving montage of conflicting emotional effects, intellectual and physical reactions.

according to this formula, should respond exclusively to demands created by external circumstances, not to those of the artist's own creative impulse. Art would serve directly the social needs of the collective. This concept formed one of the main planks in the artistic programme of the 'left', and it was a principle that Mayakovskii was to quote with approval throughout the 'twenties .

Yet Brik could also maintain, following the example of Jakobson's cavalier treatment of the content of the literary text, that even in agitational work the question of the artist's sincerity in uttering a particular thought was utterly irrelevant. In producing work of topicality and usefulness, the artist could remain unengaged: only a public commitment was required. As a recent Western biography of the poet observes, for a poet like Mayakovskii this had its positive aspect.¹⁰ On the other hand Lunacharskii, who totally deplored the influence of Brik and the other 'left' theoreticians, justifiably saw a glaring discrep-

10. "A poet - Mayakovskii for instance - could write anything required of him without compromising, without even enlisting in the enterprise his own inner self". More to the point, 'social command' helped eliminate awkward questions of the class origins of the artist determining the class character of his output. Quoted from E.J. Brown, Mayakovsky. A Poet in the Revolution, Princeton, 1973, p. 8.

ancy between this aspect of Brik's theory and the fact of Mayakovskii's deep personal commitment to the Revolution. Lunacharskii quoted the following episode:

When they asked Mayakovskii after the first reading of "150,000,000" whether the revolutionary pathos and irony which filled the poem was sincere, his theoretician friends tried to show that sincerity had no place in art. Then the same question was put to Mayakovskii in a different way: did this mean that he, as an artist without ideology, simply wanted to show he could successfully carry out a revolutionary command as well?

I am ready to argue with anyone that Mayakovskii was deeply inspired when he wrote "150,000,000", but in the company of his theoretician friends (who are, in fact, communists), he was ashamed of his sincerity and would not answer the question put to him.¹¹

Mayakovskii did, of course, subordinate his powerful lyric talent to the interests of the state.

11. Lunacharskii referred to Brik, and Shklovskii too for that matter, as 'Mayakovskii's evil spirits' who encouraged him in the belief that 'all themes were of equal value for poets'. Lunacharskii much preferred the lyrical Mayakovskii. A.V. Lunacharskii, "Ocherk russkoi literatury revolyutsionnogo vremeni", A.V. Lunacharskii - neizdannye materialy, Literaturnoe nasledstvo, vol. LXXXII, Moscow, 1970, p. 224.

u
In a letter, presumed written to Trotskii in 1922, Mayakovskii defined the aims of kom-fut as the "response to any task set by the current situation". (II,57)¹² Agitation, or indeed any other form of sub-literary activity like journalism, the writing of feuilletons, slogans, posters and so on, came within the poet's orbit as legitimate vehicles for his craft, in order to take the political message to as wide an audience as possible. Just as the productivist movement was to set out to eliminate the distinction between 'pure' and 'impure' art, so no hierarchy of genre could be accepted in literature: "the futurists do not distinguish between different types of poetry, but regard all literature as one verbal art". (XII, 57)

Mayakovskii, at the same time, re-affirmed his belief in the necessity for continual experiment along such hallowed lines of cubo-futurist experimentation as sound instrumentation, word creation, distorted syntax and so on. Unfortunately, verse, in which such techniques found extensive use, tended to be unintelligible to precisely

12. The editors of Mayakovskii's Polnoe sobranie sochinenii draw a discreet veil over the identity of the addressee of this letter. In view of their passion in all other instances to positively identify anyone connected with the poet, therefore, Brown's assumption that the letter was written to Trotskii seems perfectly reasonable. See E.J. Brown, op. cit., p. 69n

those sections of the population the futurist poets now addressed themselves. So, the verse of Mayakovskii, as also of Aseev and Tret'yakov, follows a general pattern; the gradual elimination of deliberate difficulty and its substitution by a greater simplicity and directness of theme, imagery and language. This pattern can be most readily observed in Mayakovskii's verse.

The appearance of the theory of the 'social command' accompanied an important change in Mayakovskii's political verse away from a generalised celebration of the Revolution and its ideals towards agitational verse which focussed on specific, identifiable situations and characters and which was written with a specific audience in mind. This specificity clearly flowed from the exigencies of the ROSTA windows. But the trend towards it is readily apparant even in the two earliest revolutionary marches - "Nash marsh"(1917) and "Levyi marsh" (1919).

"Nash marsh" is a poem of high emotional inspiration written during the first days of the October Revolution as the Provisional Government's control collapsed. It reflects in a series of heightened, sometimes cosmic imagery the sense of revolutionary euphoria felt by the poet. The emotional tension of the poem is controlled by a tight rythmic structure, in which alternating stanzas echo a beating drum. In view of Mayakovskii's later

experiments it is these alternating stanzas that are of particular interest, for in them the creation of brilliant phonic effects through frequent alliteration and 'internal declension' is clearly more important than semantic precision. Sheer pleasure in sound predominates over any associative meaning in such passages as:

Зеленью ляг, луг,
выстели дно дням.
Радуга, дай дуг
лет ^бустролетным коням. (II,7)

X
In contrast, in "Levyi marsh" Mayakovskii was composing for a specific audience, the sailors of the Baltic fleet. Since writing "Nash marsh" Mayakovskii had passed through the bohemianism of the Kafe poetov and begun giving readings in factories and clubs. After the poem had been received with considerable warmth by the Red sailors, "Levyi marsh" appeared in Iskusstvo kommuny. It stands, therefore, as a practical realisation of the programme put forward in "Prikaz po armii iskusstv" and "Poet rabochii".

Lh/ 1/1
Unlike "Nash marsh" the compositional elements of "Levyi marsh", its imagery, language and thrythm, are strictly subordinated to the poem's agitational purpose and directed towards establishing the agitational effect directly and without ambiguity. Not that Mayakovskii's approach was any the less original. The simplicity of the oratorical political slogans, which form the backbone of the poem,

is relieved by Mayakovskii's ability to create powerful images. Slogans and images related directly to the sailors' experience, whether in the opening line -

Разворачивайтесь в марше!

or in the stabbing refrain -

Левой!

Левой!

Левой! (II,23)

A good deal of the effect of the poem depends upon Mayakovskii's bold use of emphatic rhyme, as in -

Словесной не место кляузе.

Тише, ораторы!

Ваше

слово

товарищ маузер. (II,23)

With "Levyi marsh" the poet could indeed claim to be "honing minds with the tongue's rasp" as he wrote in "Poet rabochii". So, too, did the ROSTA windows on which he began working shortly afterwards. The windows established the pattern for Mayakovskii's later agitational work through their commentary on actual political and social problems. The windows are in turn closely related to Mayakovskii's first long poem of the Soviet period - "150,000,000" - both through their satirical emphasis and their extensive reliance on folk verse traditions.

In order to be effective politically, the poster required artistic shock-tactics, and Mayakovskii was not ashamed to adopt the guiding principles of bourgeois commercial advertising for revolutionary purposes. "Our first and basic task", he wrote, "is to rivet attention, to force the rushing crowd to stop, whether it likes it or not and by any means, in front of the slogans we want them to look at". (XII,241) The designs were vivid, the texts brief, and written, like any good commercial, to stick in the mind.

Russian folk verse has a rich tradition of humour, particularly the 'chastushki', couplets or quatrains expressing ribald, satirical or plain eccentric comments. In the ROSTA windows Mayakovskii drew heavily on the form, and also on 'raeshniki', rhymed commentaries to fairground magic lantern shows.¹³ He also parodied popular and children's songs and even well-known classical poems. Later Mayakovskii was to give his own account of the

13. Mayakovskii had used folk forms before, for example in the pre-revolutionary anti-tsarist agit-lubki. The lubok, a Russian equivalent of the broadsheet, had influenced artists like Larionov in their break with realism. Mayakovskii restored the political cartoon element of the lubok tradition. In 1919 he was to write his first satirical chastushki, the pamphlet Geroi i zhertvy revolyutsii. But at no other time was the use so intensive as in the ROSTA windows.

ROSTA windows and of the care taken in the composition of the texts to ensure the most effective formulation:

Social task - to provide words to songs for Red Army men going to the Petrograd front. Purpose - to smash Yudenich. Material - the words of the soldier's vocabulary... Device - rhymed chastushka. Result:-

Милкой мне в подарок бурка
и носки подарены.
Мчит Юденич с Петербурга,
как наскипидаренный.

The innovatory quality of the quatrain, which justifies the production of this chastushka, lies in the rhyme 'noski podareny' and 'naskipidarenyi'. This innovatory quality makes the thing necessary, poetic, a model of the type.¹⁴ (XII, 87-88).

In common with much 'left' agit-art and street theatre, the satirical image of the enemies of the Revolution presented in the ROSTA is one of grotesque

14. Duvakin notes, however, that the quatrain Mayakovskii quotes, though close to some verses published in a ROSTA wall newspaper, is not actually to be found in the original ROSTA texts. It belongs, Duvakin holds, to a group of chastushki "compiled by Mayakovskii from memory from various quatrains he wrote at different times". III, 578 .

exaggeration. There is little subtlety in the depiction of obese capitalists with shiny top hats and fat cigars, and none, moreover, was intended. The grotesque was an essential quality of the satirical sections of "150,000,000", which Mayakovskii was composing simultaneously with his work for ROSTA.

In writing "150,000,000", Mayakovskii clearly felt himself to be striking out in a new direction. In the introduction to his own selection of his verse published in 1919, Mayakovskii declared his intention to publish a new work only after he had, as he put it, 'stepped over' himself. Mayakovskii worked on his long poem throughout 1919, completing it early in 1920, though it was not to appear in print until the spring of 1921.

Like the ROSTA windows, "150,000,000" was composed in a spirit of collective anonymity: the obtrusive ego of the pre-revolutionary Mayakovskii was submerged in the collective revolutionary will of the entire Russian people. The poet claimed:

150,000,000 мастера этой поэмы ^{бы} ~~имя~~.

(II, II5)

Mayakovskii intentionally omitted his name from the title page of the first edition, but so unmistakable was the style of the work that nobody was taken in.¹⁵ Besides, infuriated by Gosizdat's

15: All the reviewers of the poem failed to maintain the fiction of collective authorship, treating it on its merits as yet another Mayakovskii poem. The only exception was Chuzhak, who with dutiful pedantry, withheld the author's identity.

effective stonewalling tactics, he had read the work in public on several occasions.

The agitational purpose of "150,000,000" is unmistakable. The poem contains passages of political publicism which in their interpretation of events are a carbon copy of Pravda or Izvestiya. Even the description of Western leaders as essentially identical to one another -

художники

Вильсонов,

Ллойд-Джорджев,

Клемансо

рисуют -

усатые,

безусые рожи -

и напрасно:

все

это

одно и то же, (II, 137)

reflects Soviet journalistic practice of the time. Yet it is agitation conducted within a narrative framework of pure fantasy.

Mayakovskii abandoned the form of the long lyric monologue characteristic of his pre-revolutionary 'poemy' in favour of a narrative plot, using the venerable genre of the 'bylina' or folk heroic epic as a basis. Mayakovskii had described his

play "Misteriya-buff" as a "heroic, epic and satirical description of our epoch", (II, 167), and this categorisation applies equally well to "150,000,000". The poem follows the pattern of the play in the handling of the theme of struggle between proletariat and capital. In both works Mayakovskii depicted revolutionary struggle in terms of a contemporary myth with folkloric overtones. Warring classes are represented by archetypes ; in "Misteriya-buff" by the '7 unclean' and the '7 clean', and in "150,000,000" by Ivan and President Woodrow Wilson. "Misteriya-buff", Trenin observed, "is very close in its plot structure, versification and the 'democratic' character of its language to folk theatre".¹⁶ The plot of "150,000,000", which tells the tale of single-handed combat between multi-million Ivan and his opponent of gargantuan proportions, Woodrow Wilson, derives, as one of the poem's provisional titles suggests, from the bylina.¹⁷

16. V. Trenin, "K istorii poemy '150,000,000'"

N. Khardzhiev and V. Trenin, Poeticheskaya kul'tura Mayakovskogo, Moscow, 1970, p. 132.

17. In the lists of IMO projects the work has the title "Bylina ob Ivane". No mention is made of an author either for this variant or an earlier prototype entitled "Volya millionov", suggesting that Mayakovskii intended to publish it anonymously from the first.

Having adopted this venerable form, Mayakovskii then proceeded to violate one of its fundamental rules by setting his epic in the present, and not, as the tradition of the genre would demand, in the dim and distant past. There is also a distinct note of parody sounded in the extreme exaggeration of the qualities of hero and villain alike, as well as in the use of certain narrative devices. Thus, when an empty-handed Ivan battles with Wilson, who has the most fantastic weaponry, and is wounded, not only do new warriors spring from his wound, but also -

Люди,

дома,

броненосцы,

лошади

в прорез пролезают узкий. (II, I51)

The central antagonism between Ivan and Wilson, socialism and capitalism, is reinforced by the sharply alternating mood of the chapters describing the protagonists. The poem opens with a description of the gathering, invincible forces of revolution and the appearance of Ivan at their head. The atmosphere is charged with an intense revolutionary romanticism -

Сегодня

в рай

Россию ринем

за радужные закаты скважины. (II, I20)

The scene then shifts abruptly to an absurd description of Chicago and Wilson in a narrative passage closely related to the satire of the ROSTA windows. Chicago is a mechanical wonderland posed on a single screw -

весь электро-динамо-механический,
a paradise of the bourgeois elite -

Чудно человеку в Чикаго!

В Чикаго

у каждого жителя

не менее генеральского чин.
(II, 130)

At the centre, in its most grandiose skyscraper hotel, lives Wilson, hugely rapacious, a guzzling monster so gross that -

растут животы

за этажом этажи. (II, 136)

The basic modal contrast between Wilson and Ivan is maintained throughout the tale. Wilson's ultimate self-obliteration is characteristically absurd -

испепелен он,

задом придавить пытавшийся солнце. (II, 159)

In this celebration of victory through collective revolutionary will, the author's ego obtrudes but rarely. Nevertheless, the poem is stamped with Mayakovskii's highly individual poetic imprint. As Brown remarks, "150,000,000" is a "triumph of sophistication and verbal skill".¹⁸ The metric

18. E.J. Brown, op. cit., p.205

structure of the poem, Trenin noted, is "exceptionally varied", and in it Mayakovskii "broadened the scope of his rhythms, working on many rhythmic forms - from classical to folk metres (songs and chastushki)".¹⁹ Changes in metre occur frequently and are generally accompanied by changes in style and intonation, effecting rapid changes of mood, for example from high pathos to satire. Besides the integration of folk forms into his technique, Mayakovskii also began to accommodate the rhythms, forms and vocabulary of practical, everyday speech in his verse. At the very beginning of the poem, high lyrical oratory -

Кто спросит луну?

Кто солнце к ответу притянет? (II, II5)

is abruptly replaced by a thoroughly conversational intonation -

Ванька!

Керенок подсунь-ка в лапоть! (II, II6)

The use of colloquial language is part of a general tendency observable in Mayakovskii's verse of drawing on the resources of contemporary speech and thus both extending the range of poetic speech and at the same time rendering poetry more responsive to the real, workaday world. Increasingly, non-poetic forms of speech - industrial terminology, popular argot, political slogans, military commands, advertising - were incorporated into

19. V. Trenin, op. cit., pp. 136 & 138.

verse, and this as part of a conscious effort to "replace the conventional metrics of iambs and trochees with the polyrhythms of language itself". (XIII, 57).

Naturally, these innovations are to be found alongside stylistic and linguistic devices characteristic of Mayakovskii's pre-revolutionary writing. Thus, the first chapter of "150,000,000" centres on a classic example of a futurist 'realised device'. Motorcycles, trains, roads, provinces, seas and a host of other inanimates rise with the oppressed -

НА МИТИНГ ШЛИ ЛЕГИОНЫ ОГНЯ,

ШАГАЯ ФОНАРНЫМИ СТОЛБАМИ. (II, II9)

This metaphor resurrects the theme of the 'vosstanie veshchei' first encountered in Khlebnikov's poem "Zhuravl'" of 1909, and which is also encountered in Mayakovskii's first stage drama "Vladimir Mayakovskii, Tragediya" of 1913. However, whilst in these pre-revolutionary works objects become animate and tyrannise mankind, in "150,000,000" man and machine are no longer antagonistic. The image of the meeting is, incidentally, fore-

shadowed in a short alliterative prose piece by Boris Kushner entitled "Miting dvortsov", published by Mayakovskii in the Rzhano slovo anthology. In that piece it is tsarist palaces that gather in revolt.²⁰ Neologisms abound, with Mayakovskii making effective use of diminutive and augmentative suffixes for comic effect. Examples of phonic instrumentation are also frequent. An extended passage of neologistic alliterative word play forms the climax to the second chapter when Ivan appears at the head of the forces of revolution. As always what appears to be

20. Mayakovskii echoed this same image in "Potryasayushchie fakty" (January 1919), in which, like Marx's famous shadow, the Smol'nyi wanders through Europe spreading revolution. A lyrical variant on the theme is provided by Aseev, then in Vladivostok,
 потухшие звезды - и те
 послы прислали на митинги.
 From the poem "Nebo revolyutsii", Tvorchestvo,
 No. 2, July 1920.

a spontaneous outburst is very carefully constructed to reinforce the central agitational theme of the chapter:

Мимо

баров и бань.

Бей, барабан!

Барабан, барабань!

Были рабы!

Нет раба!

Баарбей!

Баарбань!

Баарабан!²¹ (II, 127)

21: Roman Jakobson has pinpointed the source of this passage as a folk paranomasia which he quoted at a meeting of the Moscow Linguistic Circle that Mayakovskii attended. Another member of the Circle, the folklorist Petr Bogatyrev, recalled that it was to the Circle that Mayakovskii gave one of the first public readings of the poem. See R. Jakobson, "The Drum Lines in Mayakovskij's '150,000,000'", California Slavic Studies, vol. VI, Berkley, 1971, pp. 39-41, and V.A. Katanyan, op. cit., p. 456.

For some contemporary literary reviewers, such as Bryusov, the poem was clearly successful from both the political and the artistic point of view. Party criticism, however, was harsh. Trotskii was to comment: "How out of place, how frivolous these primitive ballads and fairy tales sound when hurriedly adapted to Chicago mechanics and the class struggle".²² Clearly exuberant parody and grotesque fantasy did not appeal to the serious-minded Party leaders. In the official application for permission to publish LEF that Mayakovskii submitted towards the end of 1922, the somewhat cryptic declaration of intent to "affirm tendentious realism" (XIII,204), albeit a realism using avant-garde techniques, would seem to repudiate the experiments undertaken in "Misteriya-buff" and "150,000,000". Intensive modelling on folk art, whether by Mayakovskii or other 'left' artists, though shortlived, had, as we noted earlier in this chapter, a perfectly valid justification in the political and social climate of the time. In the work of the Left Front, the importance of popular forms in the creation of effective mass agitational art was early recognised. In Mayakovskii's case, the devices of folk genres became absorbed into his highly sophisticated technique. The parodistic and imitative dependence on folk form of "Misteriya-buff" and "150,000,000", however, was never to be repeated, except in agitational works specifically intended for a peasant audience.

22. L.D. Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, New York, 1957, p. 153.

During 1920 and 1921 Mayakovskii produced several topical agitki for the villages, drawing for the most part on the familiar genre of the 'rasskaz'. These political fables tackled issues which at the time were of considerable urgency - the hoarding of grain by the peasants, desertion from the Red Army, difficulties in coal production, though whether they made any contribution to the relief of these difficulties must remain a matter for conjecture. As the Civil War drew to a close and as War Communism came to be replaced by the less stringent New Economic Policy, so a change took place in the themes of Mayakovskii's verse. There was a new target for his satirical barbs; that of the bourgeois within.

The change came dramatically. In April 1921, Mayakovskii wrote in celebration of the Red Army's victory at Perekop, the last battle of the Civil War, and then in a companion piece, "O dryani", turned directly to warn of a new, internal threat to the Revolution - the Soviet official who outwardly served the proletarian cause, but whose consciousness and culture epitomised bourgeois solidity and comfort. In "O dryani", Marx, staring down from his portrait on the wall, declares:

Страшнее Врангеля обывательский быт.

Скорее

головы канарейкам сверните -

чтоб коммунизм

канарейками не был побит! (II, 75)

The survival of the petty-bourgeois mentality was perceived by Mayakovskii and his colleagues as an acute threat to the promise of a revolutionary, creative human order. The futurists' rejection of middle-class norms, their hatred of 'byt', the call for a 'Revolution of the Spirit' made in 1918, all acquired new significance. In the cycle of poems written after "O dryani", Mayakovskii developed the theme of 'byt', referring repeatedly to the contradictions between promise and reality in certain areas of Soviet life. In the poem "Stikhotvorenie o Myasnitskoi, o babe i o vserossiiskom masshtabe" he contrasted the inflated rhetoric of official plans -

все разрешаем в масштабе мировом (II, 84)

with the miserable reality of living conditions, in this case the terrible state of repair of the streets. He made the demand for less talk and more action to greater effect shortly afterwards with the poem "Prozasedavshiesya", in which Mayakovskii vented his exasperation, born of bitter personal experience, with bureaucratic procedures and with the bureaucrats' predilection for holding endless meetings. In both these poems Mayakovskii sounded a warning on the real danger of the political alienation of the masses and of the isolation of the Party. As he commented in "Stikhotvorenie o Myasnitskoi...",

Я

на сложных агитвопросах рос,

а вот

не могу обяснить бабе,

почему это

о грязи

на Мясницк~~ой~~

вопрос

никто не решает в обще мясницком масштабе?! (II,85)

It was the political implications of Mayakovskii's comments in "Prozasedavshiesya" that led Lenin to make his first favourable comment on Mayakovskii's verse:

"I do not count myself among the admirers of his (Mayakovskii's - F.W.) talent, though I fully recognise my lack of competence in this field. But I have not experienced such satisfaction, from the political and administrative point of view, for a long time. ... I do not know whether it is good poetry, but I assure you

that politically it is absolutely correct.²³

[m] While the young Soviet Republic was fighting for its physical survival, Mayakovskii's energies were almost wholly absorbed in the writing of 'agitki', but the personal and lyric voice of the poet was not entirely stilled. During 1920 he composed a small group of slight lyric pieces, "Geineobraznoe" and others. The poem that opens the cycle, "Neobychainoe priklyuchenie, byvshee s Vladimiron Mayakovskim letom na dache", suggests that these were composed as a

23. V.I. Lenin, op. cit., pp.495-496. According to Lunacharskii, though Lenin "definitely did not like" "150,000,000", "Prozasedavshiesya" he found amusing "and he even repeated several lines".

e/ Krupskaya reported that Lenin had begun to warm towards Mayakovskii in February 1921, after visiting the commune organised by the VKhUTEMAS students. Apparently he was impressed by the burning enthusiasm of the communards and their passion for the Futurists. Sergei Sen'kin, one of the leaders of the commune and later active in the Left Front, recalled that Lenin asked the students what books they read. On hearing their overwhelming preference for Mayakovskii and Kamenskii, Lenin made vain attempts to persuade them to read Pushkin and Nekrasov instead. See A.V. Lunacharskii, "Lenin i iskusstvo", N.K. Krupskaya, "Chto nrazilos' Il'ichu iz khudozhestvennoi literatury", S. Sen'kin, "Lenin v kommune VKhUTEMASa", all in VI. Lenin o literature i iskusstve, pp. 671, 629 and 716-721 respectively.

reaction against the demands of agitational work. Thus, in the conversation Mayakovskii conducts with the sun, the poet confesses -

Про то,
про это говорю,
что-де заела РОСТА. (II, 37)

Though the sun comforts the poet, who gains new heart for his political work and by the end of the poem is full of optimism, the mood of frustration and despondency of the opening is in sharp contrast to the resolute militance of Mayakovskii's artistic 'commands' and other verses designed for public consumption. So, too, the formal organisation of these poems runs counter to the greater metric flexibility and conversational language observable in "150,000,000" and the 'agitki'. As the quote above shows, "Neobychainoe priklyuchenie" betrays an increasing use of conversational speech patterns along with the agitational verses, but it is organised within a perfectly conventional metric framework of regular iambs and a regularly alternating rhyme scheme. Even at this early stage, when for many others the process of disillusion in the revolution had scarcely begun, the notes of the inner conflict that was eventually to destroy Mayakovskii are readily apparent in the verse; the strident public statements of faith are accompanied by private despair that the all-embracing mechanism of revolution might have little regard for the 'personal and petty'.

In "IV Internatsional", Mayakovskii returned

once more to the call for the "Third Revolution"-

третья революция

духа. (II, 37)

This appeal is consistent with the longing in Mayakovskii, noted by Stahlberger, for the immediate realisation of the communist/futurist utopia.²⁴ Yet Mayakovskii's chiliastic expectations had little to do with the realities of the revolutionary transformation of society. The cycle of satirical poems beginning with "O dryani" point to the poet's increasing frustration in the realisation that the social and cultural legacy of the old order was not so easily to be swept away.

The antidote to despair was resolute action; direct action. In a second 'order to the army of the arts' Mayakovskii thundered a demand for utilitarian art, his own intervention in the debate among the 'left' artists. He accused artists and poets, those "futuristiki, imazhinistiki, akmeistiki", of artistic self-indulgence while the economy ground to a halt:

Бросьте!

Забудьте,

плюньте

и на рифмы,

и на арии,

и на розовый куст,

и на прочих мелехлюндии

из арсеналов искусств. (II, 87)

24. See L.L. Stahlberger, The Symbolic System of Majakovskij, The Hague, 1964, pp. 123-127.

In a clear reference to the argument amongst the members of INKhUK, he called for the adoption of the Productivist programme:

Пока канителем, спорим,
смысл сокровенный ища:
"Дайте нам новые формы!" -

несется вопль по вещам. (II, 88)

For all artists, whether masters of the word or of plastic form, there was but one overriding purpose:

Товарищи,
дайте новое искусство -
такое,

чтобы выволочь республику из грязи. (II, 88)

As Mayakovskii's contributions to the advertising campaigns mounted by such Soviet trading organisations as the rubber goods trust, Rezinotrest, were to show, that appeal was not just to be taken figuratively.

CHAPTER

VI

THE STRUGGLE WITHIN INKhUK

By 1921 the productivist platform had been accepted by a majority of members of INKhUK, yet progress towards that goal had not been without conflict. From the very start of the Institute's work, in May 1920, all shades of opinion, represented whether by Kandinskii, the Institute's first director, or by Brik, were unanimous in the belief that INKhUK must work towards establishing a scientific methodology for art theory and criticism. But on the crucial question of the social function of the object of their studies, there were several distinct schools of thought.

Kandinskii ascribed a vital role to the emotional and intuitive in art, warning specifically against looking too closely to the engineer for help. In the programme he drew up for INKhUK he remarked:

Positive science may, undoubtedly, provide the Institute with very valuable material, but one must not hope to find in it the final solution to any and every artistic problem. One must not lose sight of the overall approach to solving the problems of art - the action of artistic means of expression

on man's inner experience of them, since art exists in the final analysis for man.¹

This view met with total condemnation from the 'left', from the utilitarians led by Brik and from those like Popova and Punin who favoured an approach equivalent to that of the literary formalists. Kandinskii's programme was rejected by the Institute's membership. He himself was to resign soon afterwards, to be replaced first by Rodchenko, then by Brik and subsequently by Arvatov.

From the time of Kandinskii's resignation until the summer of 1921, research at INKhUK was guided by a compromise programme formulated by A.V. Babichev, a 'left' artist of no great originality but possessed of the remarkable conviction that 'production' and 'easel' art were not incompatible.² Production art, according to Babichev, was both a valid and a desirable undertaking, but, equally, Brik's denunciation of easel art was too extreme. Easel painting, he felt, had a vital 'laboratory' role to play, but, most important, it was also a perfectly valid means of creative self-expression. Production art was thus for Babichev simply an extension

1. "Programma Instituta khudozhestvennoi kul'tury (1920g.)", in I. Matsa (ed.) Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let, Moscow, 1933, p. 139.
2. Babichev put his convictions into practice. Besides painting landscapes, he produced a typically productivist design for a mobile agit-theatre mounted on two lorries. Reproductions of his work are to be found in D. Sarabryanov, A.V. Babichev - khudozhnik, teoretik, pedagog, Moscow, 1974.

of the artist's traditional ground: "those who believe that art died the moment modern technology and engineering appeared on the scene are blind".³

The INKhUK programme now fell into two parts; theoretical, intrinsic analysis of art technique, and practical 'laboratory' assessment of artistic problems.⁴ In the atmosphere of maximalist demands then prevailing, such an attempt at reconciling the two wings was destined to fail, and it was the adherents of easel art ~~that~~ ^{who/} lost ground. "By the spring of 1921", one observer noted, "the ideology of the Institute.... had crystallised. It was to be expressed briefly, in just one word - the 'object'".⁵

This new concept of art as 'object' did not of itself entail utilitarianism, though it did place the making of an art object, or of a poem for that matter, on a par with industrial manufacture (so fulfilling the first part of Brik's slogan 'art as production', while ignoring 'of useful objects'). The essence of this new idea was, to use Camilla Gray's description, that "an 'object' was the result of the organised pursuit, towards a utilitarian end, of the aesthetic,

³ Babitsky quoted in Sarabryanov, op. cit., p. 87.

⁴ 'Laboratory' work at INKhUK included both individual artists' private experiments and working on set problems. On one occasion INKhUK members set to investigating the opposing concepts of construction and composition.

⁵ "Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury" in Matsa, op. cit., p. 139.

physical and functional qualities of the materials involved whose form would emerge in the process of this pursuit".⁶ The word 'utilitarian' is, perhaps, misplaced, since the concept of art as 'object' could cover not only Tatlin's designs for genuinely useful artefacts, such as his fuel-saving stove, but also art with no such practical intention. In fact the manifesto of the magazine Veshch', published by Lisitskii and Erenburg in Berlin in 1922, specifically rejected utilitarianism, and on these grounds met with strong criticism from Arvatov.⁷ The Veshch' manifesto proclaimed in part:

Every organised work - whether it be a house, a poem or a picture - is an 'object' directed towards a particular end, which is calculated not to turn people away from life, but to summon them to make their contribution towards life's organisation. So we have nothing in common with those poets who propose in verse that verse no longer be written, or with those painters who use painting as a means of propaganda for the abandonment of painting. Primitive utilitarianism is far from being our doctrine.⁸

6. C. Gray, op. cit., p. 248

7. Arvatov, in a review of Veshch', accused the magazine of making a fetish of contemporary technology, instead of creating an aesthetic of an "ever changing technically and socially functional practicality". Pechat' i revolyutsiya, Moscow, 1922, No.7, p.342.

8. "Blokada Rossii konchaetsya", reprinted in translation in S.Bann (ed.), The Tradition of Constructivism, London, 1974, p.56.

The targets of the manifesto's authors would appear to be Mayakovskii, whose "Prikaz No. 2 po armii iskusstv" with its stridently utilitarian message, was in fact published in this very issue of Veshch', and the group of painters who contributed to the 5 x 5 = 25 exhibition.

No sooner had the 'object' been proclaimed than the constructivist group, Rodchenko, Stepanova, Popova, the Stenberg brothers, Medunetskii, Gan and others, gathered in INKhUK and declared itself to be 'against the object', 'against pure art'. Almost simultaneously with the first major constructivist exhibition, part of the Obmokhu,⁹ Brik repeated in a lecture given at INKhUK in April, 1921, his claim that easel painting had outlived its time and that artists should turn without delay to the creation of useful artefacts. In the summer of 1921 Vesnin, Rodchenko, Stepanova, Popova and Ekster made public their break with easel painting at the 5 x 5 = 25 exhibition devoted to abstract painting, while Tarabukin delivered a lecture on the theme, "The Last Picture has been Painted".

After the summer recess of 1921 the composition and character of INKhUK changed radically. Pevsner, Gabo, Udal'tsova and others were so perturbed at the

9. Obmokhu - Obshchestvo molodykh khudozhnikov - Stenberg brothers, Medunetskii, Rodchenko and others.

growing influence of utilitarianism that they left the Institute to be replaced by Arvatov and Kushner. Babichev was left on his own to defend the right of an artist to follow his creative instincts. By the time INKhUK was reorganised as part of the Academy of the Artistic Sciences on January 1st, 1922, productivism had been declared its central ideology. Easel painting was denounced as a 'speculative activity'; the constructivist aesthetic of materials^{was} harnessed to a political objective:

"To find the communist expression of material constructions, i.e. to establish a scientific base for the approach to constructing buildings and services that would fulfill the demands of communist culture in its transient state, in its fluidity, in a word, in all the formations of its historical movement, beginning with the period of destruction - this is the primary objective of intellectual-material production in the field of building, i.e. 'constructivism'".¹⁰

Brik's programme for 'production art' rested on two main assumptions. Firstly he refused to recognize any qualitative difference between artistic activities and mundane, industrial labour. "We assert", he wrote, "that architects, sculptors and painters are workers of the same sort as engineers or workers in wood, metal,

10. A. Gan, Konstruktivizm, Tver', 1922, reproduced in translation in S. Bann, op. cit., p.39.

textiles, etc., and that there is no basis for qualifying their labour as creative in contrast to some sort of non-creative work."¹¹ The concept of art as a 'higher' form of activity he regarded as essentially bourgeois, since it reflected the class consciousness of a bourgeoisie that despised manual labour and placed high value, both in aesthetic and cash terms, on individual 'creative genius'. Secondly, the artist's task was seen to be the application of his technical skill and creative abilities as an innovator to the creation of a new, specifically proletarian, material culture. Yet 'production art' was for Brik not just a means of overcoming the artist's social alienation, but also a means of liberating the industrial worker from the tyranny of repetitive, meaningless toil. "We want each worker to stop being the mechanical executor of some plan or other which he knows nothing about. He must become the conscious, active participant in the creative process of making things".¹² If 'production art' had been largely concerned with the problems of applied art in a nearly traditional sense, the ideology of art as production or productivism sought to destroy completely the division between artistic and industrial labour.

11. O.M. Brik, "V poryadke dnya", Iskusstvo v proizvodstve, Moscow, 1921, p.7.

12. *ibid.*, p.8.

Once the basic tenet of art as a utilitarian craft had been accepted by practising artists who turned their attention to the problems of designing industrial, mass-produced materials and goods, the leading theoreticians of productivism, Brik, Kushner and Arvatov, could attempt to elucidate the problem of the most useful place for the artist in industry. Mass-production industry, as opposed to small-scale manufacturing or handicraft, was, as the most highly developed form of production, the artist's true field of operations. According to the productivists, the artist could replace most successfully the design engineer, the occupation in which the techniques of the artist and the skills of the engineer met. The artist, with suitable training, would be able to design an industrial product with regard to the intrinsic physical properties of the component materials and the product's intended use, in order to produce useful goods of high artistic quality. As Brik observed with reference to Rodchenko's work, this type of industrial art differed radically from applied art, for instead of giving external decoration to a finished object, the productivist artist intervened at the very beginning of the manufacturing process by giving the object its shape and form. Brik wrote: "There is nothing for the applied artist to do if he cannot embellish the object, - for Rodchenko the complete

absence of embellishment is a necessary prerequisite for the functional construction of the object".¹³ Furthermore, subordination to strict functionalism left no place for artistic whim.

This utilitarianism, which underpinned the programme and aesthetic of LEF, was, as Arvatov pointed out somewhat later, part and parcel of a vision of art forms that would invigorate and enrich man's daily experience of the world in a way that 'pure', bourgeois art could not.

"Art must be utilitarian from beginning to end. Pure art, art for art's sake, form as an end in itself, - all this is the product of the bourgeois dis-organising social order, which developed spontaneously and therefore did not know how to control the concrete material of development and introduce inventiveness within life".¹⁴

Of the propogandists of productivism, Arvatov was by far the most prolific, and the most crusading. Brik, as with his contribution to literary formalism, played a vital role as the initiator of ideas and as a speaker, but he published few articles. Unlike Brik and Kushner, who sought to create a marxist aesthetic on the basis of their existing, strong commitment to the avant-garde, Arvatov, as a Proletkul't theoretician, adopted

13. O.M. Brik, "V proizvodstvo", LEF, 1923, No. 1, p. 105.

14. B.I. Arvatov, Iskusstvo i proizvodstvo, Moscow, 1926, p. 89.

constructivism as the art tendency that fitted in with his model of artistic development; a model that unfortunately did not recommend itself through its extreme over-simplification. For Arvatov, art forms were the product of social changes: changes in art forms in the past depended directly on changes in socio-economic structures. Arvatov considered constructivism, in so far as it advocated new, technicist artistic principles, to be in harmony with the socio-economic forces unleashed by the revolution. Speaking at the second All-Russian Congress of Proletkul'ts in November 1921, Arvatov, basing his argument on the Bogdanovite principle of 'art as organisation', declared:

In as much as constructivism is not ~~as~~ a form but a method, in so far as this method is subject to collectivization, in so ~~far~~ as it is based on the socio-technical use of materials, in so far, finally, as it envisages its direct task to be the organisation not only of ideas and people, but of objects as well, so constructivism is an historic movement, bridging the gap between the art of ossified forms built outside life and socially vital, evolutionary and dynamic art, i.e. proletarian art".¹⁵

In this statement Arvatov restored to art the

15. B.I. Arvatov, Iskusstvo i klassy, p.85

af communicative function that Brik had so roughly dismissed in the past. The proletarian artist, Arvatov had retorted in reviewing one of Brik's articles, "for whom art and life are inseparable, must come to the aid of his party by propogandising in images the great ideas of his class".¹⁶ As a member of Proletkul't, Arvatov also objected to the claims brought by Brik, Al'tman and the other 'left' artists with regard to the 'proletarian' nature of 'left' art. 'Left' art, Arvatov claimed, represented only the culture of the "revolutionary-artistic intelligentsia". It represented art that was "necessary, important and historically expedient, but far from proletarian".¹⁷ By 1921 the obsessive claims to the title proletarian had largely ceased, and once the constructivist movement had set itself utilitarian tasks, the aesthetic conditions for producing Arvatov's Proletkul't ideal of a creative synthesis of art and production could be met. Having espoused constructivism and its theoretical offshoot, productivism, Arvatov propogandised it with zeal in the Proletkul't and marxist press. He wrote;

16. Pechat' i revolyutsiya, 1921, No.2. p.216.

The article in question was Brik's "Khudozhnik i kommuna", Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, Petrograd, 1919.

17. ibid., p. 217.

The basic task of the proletariat, as a collectivist class, is that art should be the creation of forms, not those existing outside life (easel art, chamber music), but the forms of life itself. To create a joyful, excellent life and not to 'reflect' it, to build, to merge the artist with the producer, to unfold the riches of the human collective in the real world, to give shape to the materials with which people come into daily contact - that is the genuinely great ideal worthy of the working class.

157 But this can only be achieved by destroying the aesthetic, i.e. self-sufficient canons which exist outside life, and switching to the study and shaping of pure materials in order to create from them socially necessary, practical, contemporary, and as a result not congealing, forms evolving in step with history. 18

In productivism the futurist tendency towards the de-mystification and de-aestheticisation of art reached its furthest conclusion; art with the participation of the artist in industry, would merge with everyday life.

18. B.I. Arvatov, Iskusstvo i klassy, p. 87.

CHAPTER
VII
Tvorchestvo

Futurist activities were not confined to Moscow and Petrograd. There were futurist groups in Georgia and the Ukraine, but perhaps the most vigorous growth flourished in the very unlikely climate of Vladivostok in the Far East - the 'Tvorchestvo' group comprising Aseev, David Burlyuk, Tret'yakov, Chuzhak and others. In this lonely outpost 'Tvorchestvo', like Kom-Fut, lent its support wholeheartedly to the bolsheviks while declaring that only futurism could be considered genuinely revolutionary art. At the time the group gathered, the second half of 1919, such an open declaration of political sympathies was no mere opportunism, since Soviet power had not even been established in the Far East. Indeed, the first six numbers of their journal, also called Tvorchestvo, came out in 1920 while Vladivostok was under Japanese occupation. As a result, until early in 1921 and the group's move to Chita, capital of the no less remote D V R (Far Eastern Republic), 'Tvorchestvo' was almost completely isolated from its companion movement in Moscow.

The D V R., situated to the East of Lake Baikal, was extremely remote. It remained a democratic republic with free elections until November 1922,

when its Assembly voted for re-unification with the R S F S R. Isolation caused a natural lag in cultural development. "1922 in the Far East corresponded to 1919 in Moscow".¹ Until 1921 the futurists enjoyed the luxury of claiming to represent proletarian art without serious remonstrations from the Party, not surprisingly, perhaps, since the theorist of the group, Chuzhak, also happened to be the editor of the local Party newspaper. But isolation left its mark on the work of the 'Tvorchestvo' poets. Much of the poetry produced by the group was highly derivative and of dubious quality, even at times that of the group's more experienced practitioners, Aseev and Tret'yakov. Chuzhak, likewise, did little to advance futurist aesthetics, and his highly unorthodox, quasi-marxist theory of art smacked of a pedantry and dogmatism rivalling the worst excesses of the Proletkul't theoreticians. Tret'yakov's claim that the journal Tvorchestvo occupied an "equal place alongside Iskusstvo kommuny and ... LEF"² was, in view of the practical and theoretical contributions of the journal to the Left Front movement, highly exaggerated.

1. S.M. Tret'yakov, "Shtyk strok", Novyi lef, No. 8-9, 1927, p. 71.

2. *ibid.*, p.55.

Nevertheless, the journal and group do have an important place in the history of post-revolutionary futurism. Aseev, Chuzhak and Tret'yakov went on to join the editorial board of LEF, while another member of the group, the poet Neznamov-Lezhankin, became LEF's secretary. Furthermore, the belief held by the group as a whole that art had a practical part to play in the revolutionary process, resulting in the adoption, by instinct rather than clear theoretical formulation, of a position analogous to that of the 'social command', led to a commitment to a utilitarian artistic programme.

The origins of the 'Tvorchestvo' group reach back to the autumn of 1917 and the arrival in Vladivostok of Aseev, then an infantryman in a reserve regiment, who had been despatched to the Far East by the military authorities in retaliation for his political activities as a soldiers' deputy. When news of the October Revolution reached Vladivostok, Aseev immediately offered his services to the local Soviet. He worked for a time as an official of the local labour exchange, before finding more congenial employment on left-wing newspapers. Though he had begun his literary career in Bobrov's 'Tsentrifuga' group, Aseev had by 1914 fallen under the spell of Mayakovskii and Khlebnikov. In Vladivostok he lectured and wrote on the work of these poets.

Through journalism Aseev came into contact with Chuzhak, a veteran of the bolshevik underground since 1914, and editor of several bolshevik newspapers, and provided him with his first taste of futurist verse. By 1920 Tret'yakov and Burlyuk, who brought news of Mayakovskii and the Kafe poetov, had joined Aseev, and a small band of ardent supporters of the new art - Sillov, Tret'yakov's wife Gomolitskaya, Petrovskaya, Alymov and the painter Pal'mov - had gathered. An organisation, 'Balaganchik', was formed with its own small theatre and club. This group was to form the nucleus of 'Tvorchestvo'.

With the White army of Admiral Kolchak holding the city the group led a precarious existence. Kolchak's forces were driven out by Red partisans in January 1920, but on April 4th, on the same evening as Aseev, Burlyuk, Tret'yakov and Pal'mov solemnly toasted the Moscow futurists and revolutionary futurism, the Japanese staged a coup, occupying Vladivostok and the surrounding Maritime Province. The Japanese remained in occupation of the city for some two years until late 1922. The 'Tvorchestvo' members preferred not to wait for the advancing Red Army, and by mid-1921 had all made their way westwards to Chita, then the capital of an independent republic - the D V R - set up as a buffer zone between the Soviet power and the Japanese interventionists.

Throughout this period of political and military confusion, the poets of 'Tvorchestvo', with the exception of Burlyuk and Aymov who emigrated to the United States, unwaveringly supported the bolsheviks; a support expressed in the production of agitational verses directed against the White and Japanese occupying armies, as also against the local bourgeoisie. This political service is recognised by Soviet literary historians, who otherwise condemn the futurist programme. Thus, according to Tatuiko:

N. Aseev, S. Tret'yakov, the Chita poet P. Neznamov (P. Lezhankin) and other members of the Tvorchestvo group in numerous verses, feuilletons and 'chastushki' branded the Japanese and the followers of Semenov and Merkulov, ridiculed the vain efforts of foreign bourgeois diplomacy, which attempted to tear the Far East away from Soviet Russia and sang the praises of their revolutionary Motherland ... The verse feuilletons and agitki of the Tvorchestvo poets were in their way lessons in political literacy for the masses.³

Unlike Moscow, where newspapers did not open their columns to the futurists until 1922, newspapers provided the main outlet for futurist agitational verse,

3. A. Tatuiko, "Bor'ba protiv futurizma v Dal'nevostochoi respublike (1921-1922 gg.)", Dal'nyi vostok, No. 5, 1960, p. 161. Semenov and Merkulov were heads of right-wing puppet governments in the area, installed by the Japanese.

so that the form generally favoured was the feuilleton, that well-established genre of topical and satirical journalistic commentary. From 1919 until their departure from the DVR Tret'yakov and Aseev composed a stream of verse, sometimes jointly, finding a ready outlet in the weekly illegal bolshevik newspaper, Krasnoe znamya, edited by Chuzhak. Ridicule and invective were hurled at an enemy whose presence was all too apparent, so that on occasion, as after the Japanese coup, Tret'yakov resorted to the subterfuge of disguising Russian to resemble Japanese, writing feuilletons in the form of Japanese 'tankas'. Thus, though cut off from Moscow and from all news of ROSTA and kom-fut, the Far Eastern futurists undertook a course of action identical to that of Mayakovskii. Like Mayakovskii, too, they sought direct contact with a mass audience, reading their work at public meetings and demonstrations, and composing poems for such proletarian festivals as May Day.⁴

4. Tret'yakov recorded, with some pride, that one of his poems had, by 1922, become a marching song of the partisans. Mayakovskii, in the same issue of Novyi lef, recalled that his couplet,

Ешь ананасы, рябчиков жуй,

День твой последний приходит, буржуй,

had been chanted by the soldiers and sailors on their way to storm the Winter Palace. S.M. Tret'yakov, op. cit., p. 55. V.V. Mayakovskii, "Tol'ko ne vospominaniya ...", loc. cit., p.33.

This active participation in the political struggle led to the "recognition and adoption" by the Party of futurism "as a literary tendency fighting on the side of the proletariat".⁵ Chuzhak managed to enlist the co-operation of the local Party committee in the publication of Tvorchestvo, "a journal of culture, art and social construction", as it styled itself. The journal, as one Soviet source recognises, was "the first regular literary periodical in the Far East";⁶ it appeared in Vladivostok at regular monthly intervals from June to December 1920, achieving the not inconsiderable circulation of some 3,000-4,000 copies.⁷ Unlike Iskusstvo kommuny, which served a narrow readership of professional artists and confined itself to purely artistic matters, Tvorchestvo aimed at a working-class readership and carried political material as well as verse and articles on art. It made for a strange combination, with the vigorous propaganda of futurism

5. N.N. Aseev, "Oktyabr' na Dal'nem", Novyi lef, 1927, No.8-9, p. 46.

6. A. Tatuiko, op. cit., p. 161.

32/ 7. This figure, drawn from A.I. Khailov's article "Periferiinye zhurnaly" in Ocherki istorii russkoi sovetskoi zhurnalistiki, 1917-1923, p.475, conflicts with Aseev's assertion that Tvorchestvo achieved a circulation, "unprecedented in the Far East", of 7,000 copies, as compared with a figure of 5,000 copies for the most popular newspaper in Vladivostok. N.N. Aseev, "Tri goda na Dal'nem Vostkoe". Pechat' i revolyutsiya, No. 6, 1922, p.108.

taking place alongside the provision of information of a political and publicistic nature, including reprints of articles by Lenin, Stalin, Trotskii and Zinov'ev from the Central Soviet press, reports of the first communist 'subbotniki', and material of purely local interest. In view of the advocacy of the theory of 'literatura fakta' by Chuzhak and Tret'yakov from 1925 onwards, the publication in Tvorchestvo of examples of reportage and diary materials chronicling White Guard atrocities in Siberia is of particular interest.

The combination of futurism and political journalism was entirely consistent with the political and cultural views of Chuzhak, Tvorchestvo's editor, who considered culture to be simply another weapon in the political struggle. Proletarian culture, Chuzhak asserted, consisted of "those means and instruments, spiritual and material, which the proletariat applies in its struggle for near and distant goals".⁸ The balance between the arts and political materials depended on the vagaries of the current situation. An editorial explained that "the 'physiognomy' of the journal ... changes each month according to the conditions of the situation and moment".⁹ Thus each issue focussed on a single theme, and if necessary, the arts took second place.

8. N.F. Chuzhak, "Golgofa proletarskoi kul'tury", Tvorchestvo No.2., Vladivostok, 1920, p.3.

9. "Zadachi zhurnala", Tvorchestvo, No.7, Chita, 1921, p.3.

Tvorchestvo No. 3 concentrated on "tactical questions", and No.4 on the "collision of socio-psychological contradictions"¹⁰, as the editors termed the problem of the adaptation of the intelligentsia to the new revolutionary order.¹¹

The journal was, however, consistent in publishing verse. That of the local poets displayed little originality or merit. Aseev and Tret'yakov, though more skilled, failed to rise above the level of vague revolutionary euphoria, whether imbued with romantic colouring, as in Tret'yakov's "Tu" -

Сердце взшло на востоке и светится.

Весны объявлены всем северянам - I²

or with cosmic implications, as in Aseev's "Nebo revolyutsii" -

То идут походным маршем

К земле - на помощь - планеты. I³

10. *ibid.*

11. From an editorial comment in Tvorchestvo No.4, it seems that the political emphasis of the journal caused complaints, for the editor noted; "If the conditions of our reality change in the direction of even slightly freer breathing and existence, we will turn again to questions of art".

12. S.M. Tret'yakov, "Tu", Tvorchestvo, No. 4, Vladivostok, 1920.

13. N.N. Aseev, "Nebo revolyutsii", Tvorchestvo, No.2, Vladivostok, 1920.

The example of Mayakovskii, and to a lesser extent of Khlebnikov, overshadowed the work of the 'Tvorchestvo' poets; one poet, Kuz'ma Zhakh, went so far as to produce a direct paraphrase of Mayakovskii's "Prikaz No. 1". Reprints of parts of Mayakovskii's pre-revolutionary long poems "Oblako v shtanakh" and "Voina i mir", and Khlebnikov's long poem "Vila i Leshii" and declaration "Pravitel'stvo zemnogo shara" made up a large share of the verse printed in the journal.

So, too, the majority of critical articles was devoted to cubo-futurism. Aseev and Burlyuk undertook the introduction of cubo-futurist verse and the elucidation of cubo-futurist poetics for a culturally naive audience in a spirit very much like that of the Gazeta futuristov. Aseev eulogised his friend Khlebnikov in the most extravagant terms, while Burlyuk wrote with enthusiasm of futurism's innate identity with the revolution.

The revolution came. All that had gone before collapsed.... Life, the Street - took Futurism to itself like a red rag, - Futurism which had not yet served anyone, - Futurism, spat on by all, dirty from nights spent in the gutter, unafraid of the rough animal words of life. It took Futurism because the latter believed more in the truth of life than in tradition,

because Futurism always honoured one thing alone: freedom, and for art that means freedom of creativity.¹⁴

However, Burlyuk's ideal of creative freedom had already been compromised in the feuilletons of Aseev and Tret'yakov and was to be completely destroyed by the theories of Chuzhak. While Burlyuk celebrated the free creative revolution of futurism, Chuzhak absorbed it into the structure of his own theoretical framework for a revolutionary marxist aesthetic and advocated futurism as proletarian art.

Chuzhak, though he later became highly critical of LEF's poetic practice, defended cubo-futurism in Tvorchestvo as strongly as any of his literary colleagues, compensating for the brevity of his acquaintance with the verse of the movement by the vigour of his support. According to one Soviet source, he was the sole Party commentator during the Civil War to recognise without equivocation Mayakovskii as the "leading figure in literature".¹⁵

14. D.D. Burlyuk, "Ot laboratorii k ulitse", Tvorchestvo, No. 2, Vladivostok, 1920, p24.

15. K. Zelinskii, Na rubezhe dvukh epokh, Moscow, 1959, p. 36.

Though a dedicated Party worker and follower of the Leninist political line, Chuzhak was, nevertheless, a maverick in his artistic views, pursuing doggedly his own concept of a 'correct' marxist aesthetic. He denounced the views of Friche, Kogan, Lunacharskii and other marxist critics as vulgarisations of marxism, whilst insisting on the correctness of his own with messianic fervour. His was, indeed, a voice in the wilderness, for the marxist press, as he complained loud and long, resolutely ignored his views or refused to take him seriously.¹⁶

The orthodox Party view on literature, as expressed by the critics mentioned above, in general derived from Plekhanov, and rested on the assumption that the classic Russian tradition of critical realist art provided the surest foundation for the development of socialist art forms. Chuzhak rejected this traditionalist view, and asserted that realism, which simply reflected the realities of a given moment, should, on the contrary, hardly concern the marxist, who, by definition, addressed himself to the evaluation of future possibilities. Rather, Chuzhak argued, the principle of dialectical materialism should govern the marxist approach to art. He wrote:

16. As early as 1912, Lenin, in a letter to Gor'kii, gave the distinctly unflattering opinion of Chuzhak as a "complete and utter fool, with pretensions". V.I. Lenin, op. cit., p.342.

7- For reality ... has a dual character: every phenomenon itself creates, during the process of its development, those forces which ^{sub} consequently negate it. To reveal the shoots of the future maturing in visible reality, to reveal the new reality hidden in the depths of the present day, to throw off the worn out, that which dominates for a time - that is the only goal of art considered in the light of dialectics.¹⁷

Chuzhak thus attempted to create a dynamic model of the inter-relationship of art forms with social progress, with the cultural progress of the proletariat always the determining factor. The principle of dialectics governed the intrinsic and inevitable evolution of art forms, as from realism to symbolism, so that art forms were essentially transient phenomena, corresponding to a given stage of social development. Even if originated by bourgeois artists and bourgeois in nature, such art movements as symbolism could still objectively answer to the needs of the proletariat in its painful progress towards cultural self-consciousness. In addition, Chuzhak rejected the concept of art as cognition, central to the realist aesthetic, advancing in its place an activist view of art. "The creation of new ideological or material values", he wrote, " - that is the sole reliable criterion

17. N.F. Chuzhak, "K estetike marksizma", K dialektike iskusstva, Chita, 1921, p. 25.

with which the dialectician approaches art".¹⁸
Chuzhak formulated these ideas in an article written in 1912, but not published until 1916, when for him at least symbolism was the 'dernier cri' in art. Concerned always with projection and prescription, Chuzhak put forward his own model for an art form that would express the condition of the proletariat on the threshold of revolution. This art form he called 'Ultra-realism', which would depict faithfully the misery of working-class life, and thus reveal the contradiction between the grandeur of the proletariat's historic mission and the reality of its existence.

Though contained within a very different framework, Chuzhak's insistence on the necessity of formal evolution and a break with realism clearly coincided with the cubo-futurist programme; a coincidence reinforced by the anticipation of Brik's formula of art as the production of material objects. But Chuzhak's socio-psychological rationale for artistic change, as opposed to the futurists' and formalists' purely intrinsic criteria, was ill-founded. Whereas the formalists based their work on empirical observation and the findings of contemporary linguistics, Chuzhak's claims were entirely subjective. This resulted in such dubious

18. *ibid.*, p. 27.

self-evident
rather than
dubious

hypotheses as that put forward later with regard to futurism, that "in respect of its socio-psychological origin, it is, undoubtedly, revolutionary in as much as the very psychology which gave birth to it is revolutionary".¹⁹ Furthermore, in contrast to the descriptive purpose of the formalists' work, Chuzhak's intention was to anticipate and prescribe future art forms on the basis of his analysis of the socio-psychological development of the proletariat, using dialectical materialism as the key. The effort to establish future patterns of artistic development remained the dominant feature of Chuzhak's theoretical work until the closure of LEF in 1925, and led him into hot dispute not only with the Party, which fastidiously eschewed formal prescription, but also with the practitioners of LEF, who failed to keep up with his theoretical models. For Trotskii, this prescriptive urge, shared by other Lef theoreticians, wrecked an otherwise potentially fruitful contribution to Socialist culture. "Even when they mark out correctly the general trend of development in the field of art or life, the theorists of Lef anticipate history and contrast their scheme or their prescription with that which is", Trotskii wrote. "They thus have no bridge to the future".²⁰

19. N.F. Chuzhak, "Kakoe zhe iskusstvo blizhe proletariatu", K dialektike iskusstva, pp.49-50.

20. L. Trotsky, op. cit., p.134.

Chuzhak's first attempt at prognostication, the theory of 'Ultra-realism', demonstrated the futility of the attempt to understand through the device of a simple formula the complex reality of the inter-relationship between the process of the evolution of art forms and the dynamics of social change, but still he persisted.

Introduced to Mayakovskii's verse by Aseev in 1919, Chuzhak abandoned 'Ultra-realism' in favour of futurism, but without dismantling his theoretical framework. "Is not futurism", Chuzhak wrote, "none other, only more complex and 'symbolised', than that which we at one time called ... 'Ultra-realism'... ?"²¹ The emergence of futurism, in fact, reinforced Chuzhak's conviction that dialectics provided the correct theoretical tool and strengthened his tendency to assert a single solution to the question of proletarian art. In futurism's liberation of poetic language, in its experimental forms, Chuzhak discovered an art form capable of expressing the mood of the proletariat. For futurism was " ... the objective reflection of the stormy music which accompanies the historic assertion of the hegemony of the proletariat, when one must smash to the foundations,

21. N.F. Chuzhak, "Kakoe zhe iskusstvo blizhe proletariatu?", op. cit., p. 44.

when the least remnant of romantic elegaism must be torn from the soul, when pity must be considered treachery, and beauty (prettiness) - blasphemy".²² Chuzhak produced statements of a similar emotional nature on Mayakovskii, "the first to be revolutionary in Russian poetry",²³ whose poem "Oblako v shtanakh" provided an example of verse that was revolutionary in both form and content.

The fight for the new art in Vladivostok proceeded in militant fashion, with the high spirits of the futurist poets complemented by the grim fanaticism of Chuzhak. Assev, Burlyuk and Tret'yakov engaged in vigorous polemics with the political and aesthetic reactionaries, abundant in this enclave of imperialist intervention, who attacked futurism as the handmaiden of bolshevism and the last word in artistic degeneracy.²⁴

22. *ibid.*, p. 51.

23. N.F. Chuzhak, "Trinadstatyi apostol", K dialektike iskusstva, p. 65.

24. Burlyuk quoted some examples of the calumnies, sometimes drawn from accounts of artistic life in Moscow drawn from the emigre press, hurled against the futurists in Vladivostok, such as this description by A. Tolstoi of the Kafe poetov: "Futurism has been declared to be proletarian art. ... Money was provided for a special establishment, where the futurist poets propagandised the new art. This was a cafe, decorated in black, with red geometric patterns and horrific designs. There on stage futurist poets and 'teachers of life', surrounded by girls who were pale from cocaine, chanted in chorus -

Ешь ананасы, рябчиков жуй.

День твой последний приходит, буржуй!

D.D. Burlyuk, "Ot laboratorii k ulitse", Tvorchestvo, No. 2, Vladivostok, 1920, p.23.

More important, however, was the attempt to get futurism accepted by the Party as proletarian art. Despite some initial success, it seems that by the autumn of 1920 resistance to Chuzhak's claims had arisen in the local Party organisation. The links with the Party that had been created,²⁵ were jeopardised as news of the conflict between the futurists and the Proletkul't, with their rival claims to represent proletarian art, filtered through to Vladivostok.

Frustration grew with conditions in Vladivostok as a trickle of information, publications and visitors came through. The RSFSR beckoned, culturally and politically.²⁶

25. An editorial in Tvorchestvo, No. 7, stated that a representative of the Dal'byuro R K P served on the editorial board of Tvorchestvo No. 6, and the Dal'byuro published No.7.

26. Aseev recalled; "We received news from Brik and Mayakovskii. This was like the proverbial first olive branch from dry land". N.N. Aseev, "Oktyabr' na Dal'nem", op. cit., p.48. In the autumn of 1920 Mayakovskii's Vse sochinennoe, with the Iskusstvo kommuny programmatic poems, reached the Tvorchestvo group, and provided them with fresh ammunition in their campaign. Aseev gave public readings of 'Misteriya-buff' in local factories. Round about this period I.S. Grossman-Roshchin, a literary critic who contributed to LEF, visited the city.

In December 1920 Tvorchestvo ceased publication in Vladivostok, and the group surrounding it dispersed, provoking something of a crisis in this remote centre of 'left' art.²⁷ Tret'yakov moved westwards via China, a country which was to play an important role in his literary career, writing feuilletons and publicising futurism as he went. Aseev left Vladivostok early in 1921, travelling as a diplomatic courier. By April 1921 the group had re-assembled in Chita to produce the seventh and final issue of Tvorchestvo.

With the transfer to Chita a change took place in the character of the journal. The emphasis on political publicism was no longer necessary, given the presence of a bolshevik daily press, so that Tvorchestvo No. 7 took the form of a purely literary journal, printing poetry together with articles of an informative and polemical character. In addition, improved communications with Moscow, brought about largely through travellers,²⁸ meant that the two fronts of revolutionary futurism could now join in common cause. An editorial article proclaimed jubilantly:

27. S.M. Tret'yakov, op. cit., pp.64-65.

28. Among those who carried tidings West and East was P.M. Nikiforov, bolshevik chairman of the Council of Ministers of the D V R , who delivered a set of copies of Tvorchestvo to Mayakovskii in January 1921.

"We greet our friends in far-off Moscow who are leading the heroic struggle for a new culture. We rejoice at the unification of fronts with them."²⁹

Tvorchestvo No. 7 carried lengthy reports on artistic developments in Moscow, with a hearty partisan bias towards Mayakovskii and 'left' art. No less than two separate review articles, by Tret'yakov and Chuzhak, were devoted to Mayakovskii's post-revolutionary verse. The activities of Mayakovskii and his colleagues, including their work in the ROSTA studio, were reported in tones of near reverence. Yet enthusiasm at the prospect of common struggle was accompanied by a sharply aggressive posture, particularly in Chuzhak's contributions.

Mayakovskii had responded warmly to the work of 'Tvorchestvo', and not only because of the participation of his old comrades Aseev and Burlyuk. The attacks on futurism from the Party rendered the support of an old bolshevik like Chuzhak invaluable. Chuzhak had already demonstrated his complete faith in futurism as the sole foundation for a socialist aesthetic. In November 1920 Chuzhak had responded to the attacks on futurism from the Proletkul't, by Zinov'ev at the Petrograd Proletkul't Conference of 1919 and by Friche in the Moscow Proletkul't journal Tvorchestvo, by charging these critics with seeking to suppress futurism by administrative means, with

29. "Moskva - Chita - Vladivostok", Tvorchestvo, No.7, Chita, 1921, p.137.

initiating a literary 'arakcheevshchina'. To attack futurism meant to sabotage the art of the future:

Mayakovskii is the highest poetic beacon of the great Russian socialist revolution, and would you, children of this revolution, shoot down this beacon, unique, perhaps, along with that other one, Lenin, shouting;

'Crucify him! Crucify him!'³⁰

Yet 'Tvorchestvo' could offer Mayakovskii more than just moral support, for in the midst of his difficulties with Gosizdat, the poet considered the publication of "150,000,000" and "Misteriya-buff" in Chita to be a real possibility. In a note to Chuzhak Mayakovskii declared; "I am sending the latest. The Arakcheevs have spread. Exchange of fire along the whole front. Print it".³¹

30. N.F. Chuzhak, "Opasnost' arakcheevshchiny", op. cit., p. 81. Neznamov recalled that such inflated praise caused some embarrassment to Mayakovskii, who remarked, on reading the passage quoted; "I don't need it, the Party doesn't need it and neither does Soviet literature!". P.V. Neznamov, "Mayakovskii v 20-x godakh", in Z.Papernyi (ed.) Mayakovskii i sovetskaya literatura, Moscow, 1964, p. 272.

31. "Moskva - Chita - Vladivostok", op. cit., p.136.

Such practical assistance proved unnecessary in this instance, for Gosizdat published the works in question shortly afterwards. Beleagured, each side attached considerable importance to the links between them.

Enraged at the spurning of the revolution's greatest poet, and flattered that Chita, epitome of provincial stagnation, should receive Mayakovskii's attention, Chuzhak redoubled his attacks on the 'arakcheevs' who posed as marxist literary theoreticians. Chuzhak swung his polemical cudgels at no less than three targets in Tvorchestvo No. 7; at the "Pis'mo TsK o Proletkul'takh", at the theoreticians of the Proletkul't, and at Lunacharskii's criticism of futurism in the "Zori" debate. Behind this militance lay the unshakeable conviction that his own programme provided the sole competent solution to the question of what constituted a marxist aesthetic. On rejecting the judgement on futurism passed by the party in the "Pis'mo Ts K o Proletkul'takh" Chuzhak adopted a deliberately anti-Party stance, at least with regard to cultural policy. Though fully aware of the very high authority of the Party's pronouncement, Chuzhak did not hesitate to protest at the official condemnation of futurism and at the use of administrative measures in a campaign, which, he claimed, was rooted in prejudice rather than reason. Chuzhak demanded of the Party that which

the Party deliberately avoided - a coherent, defined programme for the arts. "You have no programme, comrades, however hard you try", Chuzhak wrote. "Shouting and bellowing is no programme".³²

Chuzhak declared that the Party betrayed a real 'lack of culture', an indifference to cultural matters broken only by occasional forays, such as the "Pis'mo Ts K o Proletkul'takh", into the field, where its pronouncements betrayed the influence of Plekhanov's vulgarised ideas.

Yet Chuzhak's own alternative programme was in itself no less narrow-minded, no less vulgarised than the theories he so violently attacked. For him there could be no doubt as to the eventual victory of futurism, and its opponents, whether in the Party or Proletkul't, pursued a lost cause. "How can you fight what is natural?", Chuzhak proclaimed. How can you fight against a revolution if the conditions for it are ripe?"³³ The Proletkul't insistence on art created by artists of proletarian

32. N.F. Chuzhak, "Nashe beskul'tur'e", K dialektike ..., p. 101. In Tvorchestvo No. 7 this article appeared as an unsigned editorial. The article attacking the theory and practice of Proletkul't, "Na dva fronta", appeared under a pseudonym, Dilletant, while his comments on the "Zori" debate, reprinted from the Moscow journal, Vestnik teatra, bore only the initials N. Ch.

33. N.F. Chuzhak, "Opasnost' arakcheevshchiny" op. cit., p. 85.

social origin, who in practice demonstrated a predilection for easily assimilated, bourgeois art forms, and on the spontaneous development of new proletarian forms, was thus profoundly mistaken, for it ignored the fundamental law of the dialectic. As Chuzhak wrote:

The progression of forms, comrades, is a legitimate and inevitable phenomenon, and all our efforts must be so directed that all forms of the realisation of creative being should evolve without cease, not excluding even the moment of revolution, - as it was with that same futurism, which shattered traditional aesthetics. Outside futurism, as the basis of the aesthetics of the future, there can now be no creative progress, just as there can be no progress in social construction outside the individual-class perspective of the proletariat.³⁴

Unfortunately, the sins, such as ideological crudity, prejudice or plain bad manners, of which he so readily found others guilty, were to be found in Chuzhak to as great a degree^{as}, if not greater^{than}, in his opponents. In his attacks on Bogdanov and Lunacharskii in Tvorchestvo Chuzhak, displaying a monumental conceit, stooped to an extraordinary display of malice and vituperation. "Only stubborn

34. *ibid.*, p. 87.

and outmoded ignorance of art", Chuzhak wrote of one Bogdanov homily to proletarian writers, "only harmful, stupid independence ... could dictate these lines, ruinous for workers in general and worker poets in particular, to this estimable philosopher-economist, but untalented and ignorant critic".³⁵

Nevertheless, regardless of Chuzhak's weaknesses as a theoretician and critic, his colleague Aseev could claim that in the Far East 'Tvorchestvo' had forced attention on art as a serious, practical endeavour, that in the journal "questions of culture were posed for the first time with that radical sharpness which forced the concentration of attention upon them and a halt to the consideration

35. Dilletant (N.F. Chuzhak), "Na dva fronta", Tvorchestvo, No.7, Chita, 1921, p.106. Even his futurist colleagues found him an unsympathetic character. Neznamov left this description: "In Vladivostok he was first an opponent and then a defender of futurism, but he defended it with so much exaggeration that this could be explained only as the result of a lack of tact, as well as special knowledge. He was slow-witted, but needed to make quick decisions. The combination in him of futurism (poorly understood) with a sluggish, dilettante disposition was a paradox". P.V. Neznamov, "Mayakovskii v dvadtsatykh godakh", in N.V. Reformatskaya (ed), V. Mayakovskii v vospominaniyakh sovremennikov, Moscow, 1963, pp.357-358.

of them with condescension as problems not of this world' ... ".³⁶ The militant refusal to follow the orthodox line even found approval with one reviewer of Tvorchestvo. "This is a genuinely militant publication, fighting and repulsing and conquering", wrote a reviewer who signed himself A.B. "The second characteristic of the journal is its independence of thought, the absence in it of that slavish attitude towards recognised opinions and heroes, which places the stamp of allegiance on many of our Soviet publications".³⁷ These comments appeared in Gorn, journal of the Moscow Proletkul't, an organisation which had already come under the influence of the utilitarian wing of the 'left' artists, and in which Chuzhak and Tret'yakov were to wield considerable influence.

The outcome of the conflict between futurism and the Party could not, despite Chuzhak's confidence, be resolved in favour of futurism. The claims of a

36. N.N. Aseev, "Tri goda na Dal'nem Vostoke", Pechat' i revolyutsiya, No. 6, 1922, p. 108.

37. Review of Tvorchestvo by A.B. in Gorn, No.1 (6), Moscow, 1922.

tiny group of artists, linked firmly in the Party's mind with decadent bohemianism, were as unacceptable in Chita as in Moscow. In addition, the practice of the 'Tvorchestvo' poets frequently provided excellent ammunition for their critics.

The 'Tvorchestvo' poets produced large quantities of agitational verse, keeping, Neznamov recalled, the example of Mayakovskii very much before them. Yet for the 'Tvorchestvo' poets, agitational work served only to temper the spirit of an experimental enthusiasm, akin to that of the Gazeta futuristov. Some of the more emotional statements by members of the group, such as Neznamov's fervent belief that futurism was called upon "to burn all the trash and junk of the past out of the souls of our contemporaries and to give them the right to a new spiritual structure",³⁸ reflect that earlier period. For as Neznamov wrote in his memoirs; "While we sat and made out Mayakovskii 'the rebel', he had already given concrete expression to his political aims and moved a long way forward".³⁹ The expression of creative individuality, whether in lyric verse or experiment for its own sake, continued to occupy an important place in the poetic endeavour of 'Tvorchestvo', and not least because some of the poets, like Neznamov, needed to assimilate unfamiliar principles of verse composition.

38. P.V. Neznamov, quoted by Tatuiko, op. cit., p.164.

39. P.V. Neznamov, "Mayakovskii v dvadtsatykh godakh", in V. Mayakovskii v vospominaniyakh sovremennikov, p.357.

Much of the poetry in Tvorchestvo No.7 is reminiscent of the spirit of Mayakovskii's first poem written after the October Revolution, "Nash marsh", though inevitably of a lower technical standard and highly derivative. Neznamov's "Mayakov stena" is typical of the work of the local poets in their efforts to write daring and experimental revolutionary verse. The poem is a macedoine of futurist mannerisms and techniques, in which some conflicting themes as good old futurist exhibitionism -

А мои поэмы хорошие

Растопили б любую Арктику! -

and revolutionary proletarianism -

Эпохи железный почерк

Полюбите любовью рабочих - 40

stand exposed to the world without the slightest shame.

So, too, a romantic vision of the revolution, expressed with rather greater felicity, -

Открыты дома - и повсюду, повсюду

О будущем в уши шумит мотив - 41

coloured the work of Aseev. Aseev acknowledged, as Burlyuk could not, that the revolution had demands to make upon the writer, and he shared Mayakovskii's chiliastic expectations of the revolution. Retrospectively, he wrote:

40. P.V. Neznamov, "Mayakov stena", Tvorchestvo, No.7, Chita, 1921, p.18.

41. N.N. Aseev, "Tost budushchemu", Tvorchestvo, No.7, Chita, 1921, p. 9.

The revolution, and as the central subject-matter the expectation of the transformation of all human relationships, all the suffocatingly sanctimonious philistine ethical norms, the morality and aesthetics of boring bourgeois society, forced non-objectivist innovatory art to come within the boundaries of the general effort in the struggle for new forms of existence.⁴²

Aseev welcomed the revolution for emotional as much as consciously political reasons and this is reflected in "Tost budushchemu", which is stylistically and in subject-matter typical of a series of poems written and published by Aseev in Vladivostok during 1920 and 1921. In this political verse Aseev gave expression to the emotional rejection of the old order, -

Если опять этот дом - бог
если кастрюля - святища:
снова и снова - о бомбах,
свернутых в форме ветошек - ⁴³

and to the affirmation of the bolshevik revolution, -

Биват! Огромному красному флагу,
которым небо машет нам.⁴⁴

42. N.N. Aseev, Rabota nad stikhom, Leningrad, 1929, p.58.

43. N.N. Aseev, Sobranie sochinenii v 5-tomakh, vol.I, Moscow, 1963, p.110.

44. *ibid.* p. 109.

A major theme was that of the universality of the revolution, often expressed in cosmic imagery, as in

dp
Как над горящей францией
глухое лицо Марата, -
среди лихорадящих в трансе
луна - онемевший оратор. 45

The specificity required to make the 'agitka' effective is absent in these poems. The theme of the poem quoted above, "Esli opyat' etot dom - bog", bears a striking resemblance to Mayakovskii's poem "Potryasayushchie fakty", for both deal with the spread of revolutionary ideas by means of a physical agency which appears at various points around the globe. But the two poets handled the theme in very different ways. Mayakovskii produced a poetic fantasy, playfully presented as fact within a consistent narrative structure. Revolutionary ideology is symbolised by the Smol'nyi, which, in a good example of Mayakovskii's fondness for 'realised' metaphors, sweeps off its foundations and proceeds, like Marx's proverbial shade, to wander through Europe and beyond. In Mayakovskii's poem, the central image, is, by means of a 'realised' metaphor, fully integrated into the narrated plot. In Aseev's poem the narrative is extremely flimsy and provides a poor motivation for the central

45. *ibid.*, p. 115.

image of revolutionary ideas as bombs. Indeed, this image, far from being consistent, undergoes several metamorphoses. It was in the creation of effective imagery, both of an anti-poetic and poeticised nature, that Aseev was primarily interested, enforcing the imagery with a complex pattern of alliteration and sound repetitions. The obvious preoccupation with sound renders the narrative doubly skimpy.

In Aseev's treatment of the theme of universal revolution the influence of Khlebnikov is clearly detectable, particularly in the following lines, which echo Khlebnikov's doctrine of universal harmony:

И с Запада будет сверкать на Восток
всемирного племени вечный восторг! ⁴⁶

The composition of feuilletons left its mark upon Aseev's political poems. Newspaper work, Aseev wrote later, taught him "to concentrate attention on a given theme, to have the proper attitude to each event". It forced him "to sharpen and set to rights" his view of the world.⁴⁷ Aseev wrote verse for specific occasions and in response to political and military events, as for example a protest in verse written on the appearance of a British cruiser in Vladivostok. This early example of the 'agitka', dated 1917, also shows Aseev's

46. *ibid.*, p. 140

47. N.N. Aseev, Rabota nad stikhom, p. 59.

considerable uncertainty of style, couched as it is in the form of a classical ode. Nevertheless, Aseev, like Mayakovskii, instinctively adopted a greater specificity of imagery in keeping with the theme, balancing the concrete with the cosmic.

Even Aseev's political verse had a quality of strong lyrical optimism, as in a cycle of poems dedicated to the red partisans, in which he gave voice to a highly romantic conception of the role of the poet in the political struggle, -

Верь! Поэтовое слово не сгинет.

Он с тобой - тот же ^езагнанный зверь.

Той же служит единой богине

бесконечных побед и потерь!⁴⁸

e/

from

The tone of this declaration is very different to Mayakovskii's "Poet rabochii", and Aseev himself was at pains to distinguish between the lyrical character of his own political verse and that of Mayakovskii, "based on wit and satirical thrust".⁴⁹ Indeed, far from restraining his lyric individuality, Aseev continued to write and publish verse on intimate themes - love, nature and music.

Neither did Aseev follow Mayakovskii's example in the abandonment of classical metres, but continued to use regular syllabo-tonic binary and ternary metres, or, adopting Khlebnikov's practice, mixed metre.⁵⁰

48. N.N. Aseev, Sobranie sochinenii, vol.I, p.120.

49. N.N.Aseev, Rabota nad stikhom, p. 60

50. Of the agitational poems, "Pervomaiskii gimn" is composed in regular 3-foot iambs, and the third section of "Stikhi segodnyashnego dnya" is in 4-foot anapestic metre, with truncation of the final syllable at the end of two lines. Aseev also clung to 4-line stanzas.

Aseev's experimental concern lay rather in extending the range of his poetic vocabulary, and it is here that he drew most heavily on cubo-futurist techniques. Not only did he incorporate the vocabulary of practical speech, he also experimented with neologisms, using Khlebnikov's principles of 'word creation', as in -

Смеяв и речист,
смеист и печав ...⁵¹

In this poem, written in homage to the cubo-futurists, Aseev experimented with techniques of phonic structuring and 'internal declension' in an imitation of the sound of a harp -

Тронь струн
винтики,
в ночь лун,
синь, теки,
в день дунь,
даль, дым,
по льду
скальды! ⁵²

Such examples are, however, isolated, though a fondness for rich phonic structuring by means of alliteration, internal declension, assonantal and compound rhyme and other techniques permeates Aseev's lyrical and political verse, as in "Tost budushchemu" -

51. N.N. Aseev, Sobranie sochinenii, vol.I, p.138.

52. *ibid.*, p. 137.

Сегодня у времени молят музык
и пеной вина зовут облака,
и в каждой руке замороженный узок
и звездами звякнул бокал о бокал.⁵³

u An even greater disposition towards formal experiment for its own sake was shown by Tret'yakov, who until 1918 had been a member of Shershenevich's ego-futurist group 'Mezonin poezii'. This association was reflected in Tret'yakov's collection of poems Zheleznaya pauza, published in Vladivostok in 1919.⁵⁴ Tret'yakov's second collection, Yasnysh, published in Chita in 1922, showed a considerable re-orientation towards the working methods of cubo-futurism and the linguistic experiments of Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov in particular. The introduction to Yasnysh celebrated the primacy of the word as such, with the idea of art as skilled labour, and in language befitting the epoch of the proletariat:

The poet is only a wordmaker and wordbuilder, a craftsman of speechsmithing in the factory of living life.

53. N.N. Aseev, "Tost budushchemu", Tvorchestvo, No.7, Chita, 1921, p.9.

54. This collection of Tret'yakov's early verse should have come out in 1916. Tvorchestvo No. 7 reported that poems from Zheleznaya pauza were being reprinted in imaginist anthologies, and that Tret'yakov was being hailed in Moscow as all but the maitre of the new imaginist school.

Verse is only a wordsmelting laboratory,
a workshop where the metal of the word is
pressed, cut, riveted, welded and screwed
together.⁵⁵

This quote in itself gives some hint of Tret'yakov's
preoccupation with word play, with phonic structuring
and the creation of new words, new meanings and new
linguistic possibilities. Thus, simultaneously with
the production of political verse Tret'yakov indulged
in free experiment with accoustic effects, in which
meaning was largely fragmentary. These experiments
could involve free-flowing rhythmic structures, as in -

Что это? Что это? Что это? Ба!

Это - верба

Верба - гурьба

Верба - гульба⁵⁶

or more complex impeded rhythms, as in this evocation
of a storm -

Тьма не темя!

Ать-два! Ать-два!

Дзз ...

Языками, взалкав, залакала листва.⁵⁷

55. S.M. Tret'yakov, Yasnysh, Chita, 1922, p.3.

56. S.M. Tret'yakov, "Verbnyi zaklich", op. cit., p.44,
quoted by Tatuiko, op.cit., p.165. This poem was
omitted by Tret'yakov from Stikhi: Itogo, Moscow
1923, in which the bulk of the Yasnysh poems were
included. All subsequent references are to this edition.

57. S.M. Tret'yakov, Stikhi: Itogo, p.68.

The influence of Kruchenykh lies heavily on such passages, as well as in Tret'yakov's distortion of syntax, breaking of grammatical rules and the creation of neologisms. Other techniques employed in this latter field included the creation of compound words, as in -

Жена - нежноножно,⁵⁸

or of neologisms according to Khlebnikov's principles of 'word creation', as in -

Тонули в тоннели - летун, рвач!

Мигдень - мигночь: певуч ковач.⁵⁹

It was in Tret'yakov's descriptive verse, in which he sought to create an impression of landscape through a combination of visual imagery and acoustic effect, that a deliberately experimental approach obtruded most prominently. Much of the agitational verse, like "Pervomaiskaya pesnya", written and set to music for May Day 1920, relied on direct political statement expressed with minimal complexity. "Pervomaiskaya pesnya" consisted of little more than a series of poeticised political slogans:

Земля наша вольная площадь.

Мы королей короли.

В небе над нами полощут

Красных знамен патрули.⁶⁰

58. *ibid.*, p. 59.

59. *ibid.*, p. 42.

60. *ibid.*, p. 22.

A greater integration of experimental technique with an overtly political intention was achieved by Tret'yakov in "Ryd maternyi", written during his journey through China and published in Tvorchestvo No. 7. Written in the form of a dialogue, with no narrative links, between a peasant woman and her son, the poem expressed the bitter conflict between two irreconcilable worlds, embodied at the level of the individual in the alienation of the mother, with her simple belief in God, from her son, whose faith in the revolution replaces religion as a motivating force. For this dialogue of the deaf, Tret'yakov, in a manner reminiscent of the philological interests of Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, used the language of the common people, its turns of phrase and vivid imprecations, "as when the mother turns on her son -

Садись! Али лопнуло ухо!

Садись, головешка дурья! ⁶¹

Yet Tret'yakov's use of popular speech was not wholly naturalistic, betraying, on the contrary, a strong element of self-conscious experiment, which in places degenerates into word play and extended passages based on the principle of 'internal declension'. Yet even those highly critical of Tret'yakov's work admitted that in certain passages, as where the son expresses his vision of revolution, he could achieve high pathos;

61. *ibid.*, p.11.

Матка, людей глядел я!

Оголтелые

Голодалые

Грязнотелые.

Подковали таково-то ковка твякают.

У каждого в глазе - неба кусок.⁶²

As in Moscow, so in the D V R , the revolution brought about a transition in the aesthetic attitudes of the pro-bolshevik futurists, a movement towards social utilitarianism. In the Far East, however, old habits died hard, so that in the work and activities of the 'Tvorchestvo' group recourse to the bohemian posturing of pre-revolutionary futurism could still be found. This resulted in a certain ambivalence and mannerism, reflected particularly strongly in the work of Tret'yakov.

In the poem which opened Tret'yakov's Yasnysh, a poem which, significantly, was left out of later collections of his verse, Tret'yakov expressed contempt for the public in the grand futurist manner. As one reviewer of the book remarked, to express contempt for one's readers in bourgeois Saint Petersburg was all very well in 1912, but to repeat the trick in 1922, while claiming the accolade of proletarian art, was questionable, to say the least.

62. *ibid.*, pp.12-13. See the review by I. Kaligin in Sibirskie ogni, 1922, No.3, pp.164-168 and also Lunacharskii's comments in his "Ocherk russkoi literatury revolyutsionnogo vremeni", A.V. Lunacharskii: neizdannye materialy, p.225. See also V. Bryusov, "Vchera, segodnya i zavtra russkoi poezii", Pechat' i revolyutsiya, 1922, No.7, p.58.

63. Kaligin, *op. cit.*, p.165.

The publication of poetry in the ego-futurist manner, such as a slight piece of egocentrism, "Avtoportret" (1913), a self-portrait in the manner of a cubist painting, raised similar doubts, and the poem was the subject of a sharp parody in the local Party newspaper.

Following Chuzhak's denunciation of the "Pis'mo Ts. K o proletkul'takh", hostility on the part of the local Party organisation towards 'Tvorchestvo' inevitably grew. Throughout 1921 the 'Tvorchestvo' group spoke at crowded and noisy public meetings, readings and debates, at which, if the memoirs of the group's members are to be believed, futurism routed its opponents and demonstrated that it had won the hearts of the revolutionary masses. They gave lectures on such topics as "Futurism" or "The Incomprehensible in Art", relying on Mayakovskii's works for illustrative material. Clashes with the philistines and other old enemies of futurism were frequent. As Tret'yakov recalled:

At these meetings our enemies declared themselves.

There were embittered intellectual bureaucrats, who regarded futurism as an insult.

There were the hecklers, rowdies pure and simple, who came to compete in wit.

There were the solid pedants, against the solidity of whose quotes and studied arguments the futurists fought.

Lu

It was amusing to strike out at enemies,
who were political enemies at the same time.⁶⁴
But Tret'yakov noted sadly, these were not their only
opponents:

But it was vexing and painful to fight for
aesthetic radicalism when the enemy turned out
to be a communist.⁶⁵

The local Party press followed Moscow's lead in
denying the futurists' claims that the old art forms
had lost their potency and that a clean artistic
sweep was needed. While Chuzhak demanded definition
and prescription and a Party programme for the arts,
the Party newspaper, Dal'nevostochnaya pravda, called
for the spontaneous development of proletarian art
out of the accumulated inheritance of the past, while
making its attitude absolutely clear:

The working class will throw out as useless
rubbish futurism as a school which attempts
to pass off its refined and affected formalism
as a genuinely revolutionary world outlook
and which all but claims hegemony in the field
of proletarian culture.⁶⁶

This categorical rejection by the Party of
the futurist programme did not, however, much curtail

64. S.M. Tret'yakov, "Shtyk strok", op.cit., p.69.

65. *ibid.*

66. Dal'nevostochnaya pravda, October 26th, 1921,
quoted by Tatuiko, op. cit., p.166.

the activities of 'Tvorchestvo'. In the struggle for power in the D V R against the mensheviks and other parties further to the right, the Party welcomed the active intervention on its behalf by the 'Tvorchestvo' poets with their feuilletons and lampoons. Relations between the group and P.M. Nikiforov, bolshevik chairman of the Council of Ministers, remained cordial, and, on the recommendation of the latter, Tret'yakov occupied the exalted, in name alone, post of comrade Minister of Popular Enlightenment of the D V R.⁶⁷ Though Tvorchestvo ceased publication, Chuzhak still edited two newspapers, Dal'nevostochnyi put', organ of the Dal'byuro RKP, and Dal'nevostochnyi telegraf, which he used a) for propoganda of Muscovite and local futurism.

In their memoirs the 'Tvorchestvo' poets placed considerable stress on the influence of Mayakovskii as a tribune of the revolution on their ideas and activities. His authority went unquestioned, and the a) propoganda of his work proceeded unstintingly.⁶⁸

67. Earlier, in Vladivostok, Tret'yakov held responsibility for internal affairs in the local soviet, again at the instigation of Nikiforov.

68. As late as 1921 "Vladimir Mayakovskii - tragediya" was in rehearsal in Chita, without being staged. Chuzhak recalled in a memoir that he was in contact with Mayakovskii and Brik before the arrival of Tret'yakov and Aseev in Chita. The Komfut group also sent poems by Kamenskii, but Chuzhak added, "Kamenskii's poetry did not impress", and he published none of them. N.I. Khardzhiev, "Zametki o Mayakovskom", in Jangfeldt and Nilsson (eds), Vladimir Majakovskij, Memoirs and Essays, Stockholm, 1975, p. 94.

In the summer of 1921, during which Tret'yakov spent two months in Moscow, this publicity even increased. More information began to appear in the Chita press on Mayakovskii's activities. Early in August, two of Mayakovskii's recent lyric poems, "Otnoshenie k baryshne" and "Geineobraznoe", appeared in Dal'nevostochnyi telegraf, shortly to be followed by an announcement that the poet himself might visit Chita. The visit did not materialise.⁶⁹ Tret'yakov returned alone to Chita early in September, but he brought with him a large quantity of books, ROSTA posters and poems.⁷⁰

69. On August the 28th Dal'nevostochnyi telegraf informed its readers that Mayakovskii had already left for Chita with Tret'yakov, but ten days later announced that the visit had been postponed. See Katanyan, op. cit., p.456.

70. He also brought letters for Chuzhak and Aseev from Mayakovskii. The one to Chuzhak gave details of the forthcoming court case against Gosizdat, and Mayakovskii enclosed his official complaint to the legal department of the MGSPS. Chuzhak was to use these letters in an article in defence of Mayakovskii against Sosnovskii's slanderous attack in an article, entitled "Dovol'no Mayakovshchiny", published in Pravda. The letter to Aseev mentions two poems, "Nash byt" ("Nerazberikha") and "Dva sovsem ne obychnykh sluchaya", that Mayakovskii was sending. According to Tatuiko, (p.162) these poems were published in Chita. However, this is corroborated neither by Katanyan nor by the editors of the Polnoe sobranie sochinenii who, in a note to the Aseev letter, claim no knowledge of the publication of "Nash byt" in the D.V.R. Other material published included the autobiography "Ya sam" and "Prozasedavshiesya".

He returned, above all, informed of the new concepts of art and literature which had been developed during the Civil War.

Of the 'Tvorchestvo' group, Tret'yakov and Chuzhak came most readily under the influence of productivism, and if the full impact of that ideology can be identified most clearly in their writings in LEF and other Moscow journals, it still had an immediate impact on their work. Naturally enough, the principle aesthetic assumptions of 'Tvorchestvo' - the consideration of art as a means of direct participation in the revolutionary transformation of society, the desire to break down the barriers between art and life and to effect a radical change in man's emotional and ethic^{al}/values - found confirmation in the new aesthetic, and Tret'yakov enthusiastically endorsed the lead given by productivists.⁷¹ Characteristically for the Left Front, Tret'yakov regarded productivism as equally applicable to literature. And yet it is quite clear that at this stage Tret'yakov did not apply rigorously the doctrine of total utilitarianism. Poetry could still be purely experimental. This paradox resulted from Tret'yakov's interpretation of the central aim of productivism - transforming the nature of industrial labour through making the worker consciously involved in the productive process.

71. See S.M. Tret'yakov, "Revol'yutsiya i iskusstvo", in 4-i Okt'yabr' - Yubileinyi al'manakh, Chita, 1921, pp.1-7.

As Tret'yakov explained this principle in Chita:

In this movement (productivism - F.W.)
there grows the dream of the creation of man
the organiser, man the constructor and
inventor, of man delighting in the active
overcoming of material and natural forces
in a process of co-ordinated effort, of
man forming material (form) for the need
(content) of man.⁷²

Experimental verse, with its deliberate difficulties
and impeded form, shared in this process by producing
a conscious awareness in the reader of the creative
possibilities of language. "The perception of verse",
he wrote, "is the repeated overcoming of material,
the mastery of the devices of the constructive
approach of the poet to the word".⁷³ The philistine
sloth of the masses had to be destroyed. This concept
of active mastery, whether of the productive process or
of language, was of crucial importance in the theories
put forward in LEF.

For his part Chuzhak, in an essay written
shortly after Tret'yakov's return, commented approvingly
on the new concept of art as 'one of the productive
forms'. He saw in productivism the confirmation of
his own views, and he rapidly readjusted his phrase-
ology, substituting the word 'goods' for 'values' in

72. S.M. Tret'yakov and N.N. Aseev, Khudozhnik V. Pal'mov, Chita, 1922, p.17.

73. S.M. Tret'yakov, Yasnysh, p.3.

his key tenet that art was the creation of "ideological and material values". Productivism demonstrated to Chuzhak that futurism was in the process of fulfilling one of his central demands - that art should evolve continuously. "Each school or tendency in the field of science, social construction and art is a transient phenomenon", he wrote, "and is not absolute, having arisen in contradiction to a school which has passed".⁷⁴ This high regard for futurism was to change to bitter disappointment when Chuzhak was confronted by the poetic practice of LEE, but until he arrived in Moscow his enthusiasm remained undiminished.

The centre of attraction for the 'Tvorchestvo' group had always been Moscow. As communications eased, permitting a free flow of information, books and ideas, so the group inevitably began to "melt away, drawn to the centre - to Moscow".⁷⁵ Aseev was the first to go, called as a promising young writer to the capital by Lunacharskii early in 1922. Chuzhak, Neznamov, Sillov and Tret'yakov followed later. By the end of 1922 nothing was left of this once flourishing Far Eastern futurism.

74. N.F. Chuzhak, K dialektike iskusstva, p.5.

75. S.M. Tret'yakov, "Shtyk strok", op. cit., p.75.

CHAPTER

VIII

1922: From MAF To LEF

The year 1922 was for Mayakovskii one of transition. In the organisational field, 1922 saw the regathering in Moscow of the futurist poets - Kamenskii, Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, Aseev, Tret'yakov - a regathering which underscored the radical shift that had taken place in the cubo-futurist aesthetic. In 1922 Mayakovskii embarked on a new publishing venture - MAF (Moskovskaya - v budushchem mezhdunarodnaya, assotsiatsiya futuristov), though, like IMO, it too failed to answer to the needs of his group as a whole. Against this, towards the end of the year the politically motivated 'left' began to acquire some sort of general identity as the 'Left Front'. At the same time battle-lines were being drawn up for a political and artistic struggle within Soviet literature and art, that was to last for three years, until the Party's intervention in 1925.¹ It was in this year, too, that the effects of the NEP, with its attendant social and economic contradictions began to make their presence felt in

1922!

1. The principal factions were Lef, RAPP and the 'poputchiki' in literature; Lef and AKhRR in the visual arts; Lef and the 'akteatry' in the theatre.

all spheres of life. As conditions settled towards a semblance of normality, so old habits, old patterns of thought and life reasserted themselves, and the complex nature of Mayakovskii's attitude towards the course of the revolution made itself felt more obviously in his verse.

February 1922 marked the end of a difficult phase in Mayakovskii's verse. Early in the month Mayakovskii produced his last 'okna satire'; the period of intense, heroic struggle had finally come to an end. At the same time he completed "Lyublyu". This frankly autobiographical poem, in which he celebrated his love for Lilya Brik, is unique in Mayakovskii's work for it is a poem of emotional fulfillment, of requited love.² Throughout this year Mayakovskii's output of political and satirical verse remained high, but in the unfinished long poems "IV Internatsional" and "V Internatsional", on which he had begun work during 1921, new notes, discordant with the earlier uncritical declarations of faith, crept in.

From the political poster Mayakovskii switched to newspapers. On March the 5th "Prozasedavshiesya" was published in Izvestiya. This did not imply new-found approval for futurism in that august organ, for it was

2. One of the well-known anecdotes concerning Lilya Brik and Mayakovskii concerns a ring engraved with the initials L. Yu. B., which when turned reads 'Lyublyu L Yu B'.

printed on the initiative of Izvestiya's secretary, O.S. Litovskii, while the editor, Steklov, a decided enemy of futurism, was away. However, the next day Lenin singled out the poem, praising its political content, at a congress of the Metalworkers' Union. The implications of this were not lost on Steklov, who, suitably discomfited, was forced to accept the publication of Mayakovskii's verse in the pages of his newspaper on a regular basis.³

Most of the verse Mayakovskii wrote during 1922 was for publication in newspapers or periodicals, with some ten items for Izvestiya. His topical verse was concerned with political themes rather than industrial agitation, and he continued to attack bureaucratism and the bourgeoisie, whether of the international or the new domestic, NEP variety, by lampoon or denunciation. A visit in May to Riga, where the police confiscated and destroyed an entire edition of "Lyublyu", inspired a sarcastic paean to the joys of bourgeois liberty. The opening in April of the

3. Litovskii's unpublished memoir of this incident has been extensively quoted by Pertsov in Mayakovskii - zhizn' i tvorchestvo. Posle velikoi oktyabr'skoi revolyutsii, pp. 208-210, 214. Mayakovskii made caustic remarks about Steklov's resistance (see XII, pp. 169 & 293), as did Tret'yakov, who, invited by Litovskii to contribute to Izvestiya, met with a decidedly frosty reception from the editor. Tret'yakov recalled Steklov's admonishment to him: "'Your feuilletons are crude, very crude. And then the metre is confusing. You should use iambics. Iambics! Iambics! Like Pushkin. He wrote wonderful iambics' ...". S.M. Tret'yakov, "Shtyk strok", op. cit., p. 75.

Genoa Conference, at which the Western powers demanded repayment of Tsarist debts, elicited bitter protest on the poet's part. In answer to the imperialists' demands, Mayakovskii raised the banner of international revolution and pointed with indignation to the sufferings created by imperialist intervention in the Civil War:

Вонзите в Волгу ваше зрение:

разве этот

голодный ад,

разве это

мужицкое розорение -

не хвост от ваших войн и блокад? (IV, 28)

The enormous sufferings of the victims of the Volga famine prompted two poems on the theme, "Dva ne sovsem obychnykh sluchaya" (1921) and "Svolochi" (1922),⁴ and Mayakovskii participated actively in raising funds in the famine relief campaign. Whatever the allowance in the theory of the 'social command' for emotional detachment, the sincerity of the poems on the famine cannot be doubted.

4. Published in Na pomoshch' and Izvestiya.

5. Katanyan gives two descriptions of Mayakovskii's fund-raising efforts. Katanyan, op. cit., p. 163. Khlebnikov, resident in the southern town of Pyatigorsk in the summer of 1921, also wrote verse in aid of famine victims. One of the poems, "Trubite, krichite, nesite!", bears witness, Khardzhiev argued, to the influence of Mayakovskii on Khlebnikov's post-revolutionary verse. The title of the poem echoes a line from Mayakovskii's "Dva ne sovsem obychnykh sluchaya", and the poem as a whole betrays the influence of Mayakovskii's compositional technique. N. Khardzhiev, "Mayakovskii i Khlebnikov", in Khardzhiev and Trenin, op. cit., p. 125.

A feeling of genuine indignation also pervades a poem attacking the NEP bourgeoisie; the poem "Stikh rezkii o ruletke i zhelezki", with its scenes from a bourgeois gambling haunt. Revulsion and bewilderment at the reintroduction of capitalist relations in the economy, no matter how limited the extent, characterised the prevailing emotional reaction to the introduction of the NEP in the verse of pro-bolshevik poets.⁶ Khlebnikov expressed his sense of betrayal in no uncertain terms:

Не затем у врага
Кровь лилась по дешевке,
Чтоб несли жемчуга
Руки каждой торговли. ⁷

This poem, "Ne shalit'", which was printed in Izvestiya directly beneath "Prozasedavshiesya", was published at Mayakovskii's insistence. From Mayakovskii's comments in his verse on the Nepmen and from the long poems, it would seem logical that he, too, should have expressed himself in similar vein. Yet in his reaction in verse to the introduction of NEP he deliberately held his emotions in check. The imperative of the 'social command'⁸ led instead to argument in verse for the

6. Pertsov cites Demyan Bednyi, Pravda's verse feuilletonist, and the Proletkul't poets as examples. Op. cit., pp.217-218.

7. V.V. Khlebnikov, Sobranie proizvedenii, Leningrad, 1939, vol. III, p.301.

8. For the standard Soviet interpretation see Pertsov, op.cit. p.216.

necessity of this essential, though unpalatable,
tactic, which would guarantee ultimate victory:

Против их
инженерски-бухгалтерских числ
не попрешь, с винтовкою выйдя.
Продувным арифметикам ихним учись -
стиснув зубы
и ненавидя. (IV,II)

Though many of these poems were written from the first person singular and in the form of direct personal commentary on events, the "I" of these poems is not necessarily subjective. As a contemporary reviewer of Mayakovskii's satirical verse, I.A. Aksenov, pointed out, " ... the person of the author nowhere appears as the criterion of his attitude towards the subject".⁹ The 'social command' takes over from personal belief. The "I" is a device, for the author speaks as a mouthpiece for the attitudes and beliefs of the collective. However, there is also little reason to suppose that Mayakovskii was hypocritical in expressing these opinions, since, even if jingoistic, they are far from divorced from his political beliefs and intimate concerns. Bureaucratisation and the restoration of bourgeois 'byt' threatened to stifle the promise of a revolutionary human order on which, as the long poems show, the poet pinned his hopes for personal salvation. Equally, however, the "I" of Mayakovskii's lyric^{al}/verse is correspondingly complex; his attitude

-al/

9. I.A. Aksenov, quoted by V.O. Pertsov, op.cit., p.224.

towards the revolution not so cut-and-dried as would appear from the agitational verse.

In the unfinished long poem "IV Internatsional" the external threat to the revolution is joined by one in the heart of the revolution in the form of communists who still remained in the grip of bourgeois tastes and philistinism. Thus, in a particularly biting image:

И в праздник
будут играть
пролеткульцы
в сквере
перед совдепом
в крокет, (IV, 101)

he turned on the supposed guardians of proletarian purity, and called again for that third revolution, the

третья революция
духа. (IV, 103)

Mayakovskii's personal expectations of the revolution were frustrated. In "V Internatsional", successor to "IV Internatsional" and likewise unfinished, the creation of socialist Utopia, described in "150,000,000" as a task in hand, is postponed to a distant future, though his vision of it is unclouded and his confidence in its eventual realisation undiminished. The satirical verse, Jakobson suggested, was itself a response to the realisation that there would be no quick and easy victory.

"The journalistic verse of Mayakovsky", Jakobson wrote, "represented a shift from an unrestrained frontal attack (on 'byt' - F.W.) in the direction of an enervating trench warfare".¹⁰

So, too, the image of the poet put forward in "V Internatsional", a poem which would "show art as it will be in 500 years time" - (I, 26) - is richer than the self-image created in programmatic verse like "Poet rabochii". The poem opened with another "Priказ", the third, in which Mayakovskii reiterated the anti-aesthetic concept of the poet not only as a direct participant in social events but also, a logical result of Brik's refusal to differentiate between 'pure' and 'impure' art, as the destroyer of poetry as a distinctive artistic activity.

The poet speaks of stripping verse of its poetic qualities and forcing it into line with the natural sciences; a utilitarian poetry possessing great economy of expressive means.

Я

поэзии

одну разрешаю форму:

краткость,

точность математических формул.

К болтовне поэтической я слишком привык, -

я еще говорю стихом, а не напрямик.

(IV, 108)

10. R. Jakobson, "On a Generation that Squandered its Poets", in E.J. Brown, (ed.), Major Soviet Writers, London, 1973, p. 27.

Jakobson has provided a revealing commentary of this passage:

Mayakovsky always regarded ironically talk of the insignificance and early disappearance of poetry (really nonsense, he would say but useful for the purpose of revolutionizing art).... The published introduction to the poem ("V Internatsional" - F.W.) is ^{2a/}in order to vacate the beauties of verse and introduce into ^{e/}poetry the brevity and accuracy of mathematical formulae. He offers an example of a poetic structure built on the model of a logical problem. When I reacted skeptically to this poetic program - the exhortation in verse against verse - Mayakovsky smiled: 'But didn't you notice that the solution of my logical problem is a trans-sense solution?'¹¹

The political poems, the satire, all this was not just in response to a 'social command', no matter how well-defined or urgent. It was very much part of an intense personal vision which craved the destruction of the laws of time and progress. Jakobson writes:

Mayakovsky's conception of the poet's role is clearly bound up with his belief in the possibility of conquering time and breaking its steady, slow step. He did not regard poetry

^{e/} 11. *ibid.* p.14. For the actual introduction of mathematical formulae into verse, see Tret'yakov's "I-oe maya", LEF No.2. p.9.

as a mechanical superstructure added to the ready bases of existence (and it is no accident that he was so close to the formalist literary critics)... Mayakovsky's recurrent image of the poet is of one who overtakes and passes time, and we may say that this is the real image of Mayakovsky himself.¹²

The image of the poet simply as a wordsmith in the political cause is, therefore, misleading. Mayakovskii's real self-image, Jakobson suggests, was much more complex, though rarely encountered in his post-revolutionary verse. There is a brief glimpse of it in "V Internatsional" where the poet steps out of the present, and is able to taste the future and so escape the spiritual rigor mortis of 'byt'.

И это "Я"
вот,
балагурия,
прыгая по словам легко,
с прошлых
многовековых высот,
озирает высоты грядущих веков. (IV,122)

There existed, therefore, a strong tension between the realities of the here-and-now and Mayakovskii's personal expectations and psychological needs, and likewise between the publicly adopted concept

12. *ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

of the poet's function and his private self-image. This tension coupled with a breakdown in his relationship with Lilya Brik provoked a deep inner crisis, which achieved catharsis in the important long poem "Pro eto".

In his Life of Mayakovsky, Woroszylski has described the period 1921-1922 as one of "leave-takings". He wrote: "In the period of stabilization critics speak about the end of Futurism. Mayakovskii becomes even more isolated".¹³ The critics, to be specific, Valery Bryusov, did indeed describe futurism as dead. In another respect, Woroszylski's claim is surely exaggerated. 1922 marked a period of re-assessment and regrouping. Utilitarianism forced an ever-widening split amongst 'left' artists, with Kandinskii, Gabo and Persner leaving the RSFSR, and amongst the poets too. The remnants of the cubo-futurist movement gathered in Moscow, but cubo-futurism as such had lost its vitality. The creative initiative had passed into the hands of Mayakovskii and the adherents of utilitarianism, resulting at times in estrangement from former friends.

Pasternak, whom Mayakovskii singled out for praise, along with Aseev, as the leading light of contemporary poetry, (XII, 456, 457), felt himself increasingly

13. W. Woroszylski, The Life of Mayakovsky, London, 1972, p.284.

isolated from Mayakovskii, whose pre-revolutionary lyric poetry he had so much admired. Writing much later, Pasternak attributed his alienation from Mayakovskii directly to the latter's agitational verse:

With the exception of that immortal document 'Vo ves' golos', written shortly before his death, the later Mayakovskii, beginning with 'Misteriya-buff', is foreign to me. Those awkwardly rhymed maxims, that refined emptiness, those platitudes and hackneyed truths put forward so artificially, confusedly and fully, fail to touch me.¹⁴

Yet, despite this coolness on Pasternak's part, Mayakovskii remained a keen admirer of Pasternak's verse, particularly his lyrics, and had plans to

14. B.L. Pasternak, "Avtobiograficheskii ocherk", Proza 1915-1958, Ann Arbor, 1961 p. 43.

Rita Rait, who knew both Pasternak and Mayakovskii well during this period, accused Pasternak of distorting the truth in this memoir. "How could he (Pasternak-F.W.) so forget everything - both Mayakovskii's eyes and general youthful appearance when he listened to Pasternak's verse, and how B.L. himself listened to 'Pro eto' with all his being? R. Wright-Kovaleva, "Mayakovsky and Pasternak: Fragments of Reminiscence", Oxford Slavonic Papers, Vol. XIII, 1967, p. 132.

publish it. Mayakovskii also insisted on including Pasternak in the lists of LEF 'Sotrudniki', much to the latter's annoyance.¹⁵

In the latter part of 1921, Kamenskii, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh all returned to Moscow, after being trapped by war in the Caucasus, relieving Mayakovskii of the burden of bearing alone the banner of cubo-futurism.¹⁶

L-1
15. Pasternak claimed that Mayakovskii preferred his early lyrics, contained in the collections Poverkh bar'erov and Sestra moya/zhizn', a projected IMO publication, to the poems "1905 god" and "Leitenant Shmidt", which dealt with the theme of revolution, and that Mayakovskii even considered the composition of the latter to be a mistake. B.L. Pasternak, "Avtobiograficheskii ocherk", op.cit., p. 37. In her memoirs Rita Rait recalled remarks made by Mayakovskii after a reading of Pasternak's verse, which, if accurately remembered, throw light on Mayakovskii's attitude both towards Pasternak and also towards the suppression of his own lyric gift. "Lucky Pasternak. Look what lyrics he writes. And probably I will never again ...". R. Wright-Kovaleva, op.cit., p. 129.

16. Kamenskii and Khlebnikov had stayed only briefly in the Caucasus, whereas Kruchenykh was resident in the area for some five years, travelling there in 1916 to avoid call-up into the Tsarist army. Like the Far East, the Caucasus was the scene of great political and military confusion after the Revolution. The three republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia existed as independent states, Georgia, the only area of the Russian Empire to fall under menshevik control, finally capitulated to the Red Army in February 1921.

In Tiflis Kruchenykh led a flourishing group of futurists, known as 41° - I. Zdanevich, I. Terent'ev and others - a group which produced a large body of zaum' verse and even plays. Markov writes in his comprehensive survey of the futurist movement that Kruchenykh's stay in the region marked "one of the most fascinating, though little-known, episodes in the history of Russian futurism."¹⁷ Kruchenykh was hardly less active in Moscow, speaking at literary disputes and reading his verse, often alongside his cubo-futurist colleagues.¹⁸

17. V. Markov, Russian Futurism, London, 1968, p. 336.

18. On December the 25th, 1921, Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov, Kamenskii and Mayakovskii read for the students of the VKhUTEMAS, and Gorn, the proletkul't magazine, reported that Kruchenykh was among the poets who read their work in the LITO section of the Moscow Proletkul't. N. Khardzhiev, Velimir Khlebnikov: neizdannye proizvedeniya, Moscow, 1940, reprinted Munich, 1971, p. 485, and Gorn, No. 8, 1923, p. 248. According to Katanyan, Mayakovskii conducted a rather embarrassed 'excursion round Kruchenykh' at the Polytechnical Museum in September 1921. Katanyan, op. cit., p. 155. Kruchenykh himself reported that, among his many lectures, he delivered one at the Moscow Linguistic Circle on "anal erotica, chiefly in sound shifts", to the interest of his audience. A.E. Kruchenykh, Zaumniki, Moscow, 1922, p. 24.

He also continued to be an active publisher of his own work, putting out six books of verse during 1921 and 1922, demonstrating the theory and practice of his own and other poets' 'zaum' to the Moscow public. Interestingly, in view of the debate raging in INKhUK over productivism, four of these editions contained illustrations by Rodchenko. Rodchenko's frontispiece for Zaumniki consisted of an abstract, black and red paper and fabric collage glued onto the page, and as such harked back to pre-Revolutionary futurist editions.

Kruchenykh remained true to the principles of zaum' encompassed in the first paragraph of his "Deklaratsiya zaumnogo yazkya", which he reprinted in nearly all his books, and which had remained basically unchanged since his first pre-revolutionary declarations:

Thought and speech cannot catch the experience of one inspired, and so the artist is free to express himself not only in common language (concepts) but also in a personal one (the creator is individual), and in language without definite meaning (which has not congealed), zaum'.¹⁹

Kruchenykh therefore continued his experiments with the raw material of verse, with language conceived as the play of sound in which sense was secondary.

19. A.E. Kruchenykh, Zaumniki, p. 12.

Markov reports that in one edition published in 1921, Kruchenykh repeated his experiments with the visual organisation of the text upon the page,²⁰ but those he issued in 1922 were typographically conventional. Kruchenykh's verse of this period reveals a preoccupation with the organisation of sound. On occasion he provided examples of pure sound poetry, in imitation, for example, of the sounds of modern warfare, but elsewhere he hung his experiments around a recognisable theme - the seasons, for example. More often the subject-matter was obscure or alogical, deliberately anti-poetic.

One of his poems, "Golod khimicheskii", eccentrically reflects the technological mania of the period in a primitivist celebration of carborundum. These poems, whether whimsical, deliberately mediocre or downright irreverent, as in the search for unconscious scatological readings in the verse of Pushkin and other classics, could also be macabre. Kruchenykh's contribution to the poems on the Volga famine included the poem "Golod", a description of a ghastly last meal on human flesh by a starving family, recorded with a cool matter-of-factness.²¹

20. Markov, op. cit., p.366.

21. This poem was published by Kruchenykh in Golodnyak, Moscow, 1922. The copy in the Lenin Library in Moscow bears the author's inscription - "To A.V. Lunacharskii - dyr-bul-shchyl, 27/II - 22g." One wonders whether Lunacharskii appreciated the gift.

Reviewers had little sympathy for Kruchenykh and heaped abuse on his work. Bryusov referred to "Golod" as "the most vulgar doggerel", while Mandel'shtam considered Kruchenykh's verse to be "bankrupt and unintelligible".²² Kruchenykh was not one to be depressed by critical disapproval. He headlined the introduction to Zaumniki "Victory without end!" and closed it with a defiant and suitably scabrous declaration:

At the present time I give the command: know that there exists a particular poetic school - of zaum', which represents the limits of poetry, which offers salvation to all schools rotting from noseless tendentiousness and big-nosed diarrhetic subject-matter! ...

Zhlych! ...²³

22. V. Bryusov, "Sredi stikhov", Pechat'i revolyutsiya, 1922, No. 2 (5), p.148; O.E. Mandel'shtam, "Literaturnaya Moskva", Sobranie sochinenii, New York, 1966, Vol.II, p.371. Bobrov was equally caustic: "Kruchenykh never was a poet and from this point of view he represents a consummate example of lack of talent". S. Bobrov, review of Kruchenykh's Buka russkoi literatury, Pechat'i revolyutsiya, 1923, No.3. p.253.
23. A.E. Kruchenykh, "Pobeda bez kontsa", Zaumniki, p.17. In his school of zaum' poets Kruchenykh included Khlebnikov, Zdanevich, Trent'ev, Petnikov, Kamenskii, Guro and Aseev, together with some artists who had dabbled in verse - Filonov, Malevich, Rozanova and Varst (Varvara Stepanova). As theoreticians of "zaum'" he included Matyushin, the composer of the music for his opera "Pobeda nad Sol'tsem" and, on the strength of the Poetika essays, Jakobson, Shklovskii, Brik and Yakubinskii. Under the nom-de-plume 'R.Alyagrov', Jakobson featured also as a zaum' poet. Kruchenykh also quoted an example of Alyagrov's zaum' prose in "Pobeda bez kontsa".

Clearly the intention "to move the word towards vehement non-objectivism, towards pure word creation, zaumnyi yazyk",²⁴ was no longer operative for a movement which advocated the theory of the social command. Yet the debate on zaum' was not yet over. The practical effect of Kruchenykh's ideas may be traced in Tret'yakov's work on the 'organisation of speech' in theatre, writing captions for silent films and composing political slogans.

Kamenskii too, had returned to Moscow, but his work was if anything even more peripheral than Kruchenykh's. Kamenskii had left Moscow in 1919 to become a cultural worker on the Southern front. Captured by the Whites and rescued by the Reds, he had travelled to the Caucasus before returning to Moscow in 1921. Both Markov and Stepanov, editor of a selected edition of Kamenskii's verse, published in the Soviet Union in 1966, are scathing of Kamenskii's post-revolutionary shorter works, which lacked the originality of the "ferro-concrete" poems written just five years before. A cycle of poems on the theme of industry, entitled "Paravoz Oktyabrya" (1919) showed Kamenskii as an inept agitator, writing naive songs about anthropomorphic machinery. Using "Paravoz Oktyabrya" as an illustration, Stepanov writes:

24. A.E. Kruchenykh, Zaumniki, p. 12.

The pathos of the construction of a new world became the basic subject matter of Kamenskii's post-revolutionary verse. Unfortunately he interpreted the new reality over-superficially, without finding his own point of view, an individual poetic interpretation of it. His verse was made for the most part for effect, rhetorical, and was reduced to general formulae, journalistic cliches.²⁵

27 During the twenties, encouraged, perhaps, by Mayakovskii's good opinion of his play "Sten'ka Razin", Kamenskii turned to the theatre. A number of his plays were actually staged, and Lunacharskii expressed qualified approval of "Paravoznaya obednya", the first Soviet drama on the theme of industrial production, both in a review in Izvestiya and in a letter to Lenin. Later reviewers have been less kind, however, finding that Kamenskii "totally lacked talent in this area".²⁶ Kamenskii showed no inclination to subordinate himself to the stern dictates of the 'social command'. He remained an enthusiastic exhibitionist, publishing in 1922 a journal, Moi zhurnal Vasiliya Kamenskogo, containing eulogies on his verse. The productivist ethos was alien to him, and he preferred to celebrate

25. V.V. Kamenskii, Stikhotvoreniya i poemy, Moscow, 1966, p.33. Markov remarked that "it is hard to find ... anything of real value or novelty in Kamenskii's poetry after Zvuchal' vesneyanki", published in 1918 (though he did consider "Katorzhnaya taezhnaya", printed in LEF No. 4, to be Kamenskii's phonetic masterpiece). V.Markov, op. cit., p. 333.

26. V.Markov, op. cit., p. 352. Stepanov comments: "Critics have justly charged these plays with crudeness and superficiality". V.V. Kamenskii, op. cit., p.33. 193

a rural idyll. While kom-fut stressed the revolutionary nature of futurism, Kamenskii remained true to the spirit of anarchic and spontaneous revolt characteristic of the pre-revolutionary movement. His heroes then were the leaders of the great Russian peasant revolts, Stepan Razin and Emel'yan Pugachev, and of the two Razin provided the most consistent inspiration. Even before the October revolution, Kamenskii had written a novel, two versions of a play and several versions of a long poem about Razin.

Kamenskii could claim genuine popularity for the long poem "Sten'ka Razin", which he read on numerous occasions in public. Lunacharskii recalled in a highly flattering article that the poet even "became known to Vladimir Il'ich, who liked his poetry".²⁷ But regardless of his popularity or his ability to catch the turbulent mood of the epoch, Kamenskii had little to offer in the current artistic debate.

Neither, for that matter, had Khlebnikov. He too evoked the shade of Razin in two long poems in the post-revolutionary period. Khlebnikov's perception of the October revolution, of which he was an enthusiastic observer, owed nothing to the acceptance of Marxism, but rather was the product of his eccentric, highly poetic, personal philosophy. He saw in a Slavic primeval past a model for a future utopia of universal harmony. He studied the patterns of history in order to discover the mathematical laws of time which would permit accurate

27. A.V. Lunacharskii, Sobranie sochinenii, Vol. II, p. 541.

predictions of the future. His conception of zaum' was philosophical; an attempt to rediscover the roots of a universal language with clear conceptual meaning. *from/* As such it was of an entirely different order to the zaum' of Kruchenykh, which, through the combination of meaningless sounds and half-words, defied meaning.

Khlebnikov's powers as a utopian visionary, as well as his naivete as far as practical politics were concerned, found their highest expression in the long poem "Ladomir" published in LEF. For all his utopianism Khlebnikov could also react to contemporary events, as is clear from long poems like "Noch' pered sovetami" and "Nochnoi obysk", written during 1920 and 1921 and which record a vivid picture of the brutality of the Civil War. Shorter poems like "Ne shalit'", "Narvruz truda", "Trubite, krichite, nesite!" and others, while not agitational poems in the Mayakovskian sense, represent a direct, favourable response to the drive to create a new society.

Khlebnikov acquired the status of a living legend, the result of his extraordinary way of life as well as his literary gifts. His ideas continued to inspire the avant-garde, particularly after the revolution - the date of which he had predicted - when the innovatory artist achieved a new social significance and the label futurist acquired a new connotation. His division of humanity into two classes - the 'izobretateli', the creative innovators, and the 'priobretateli', those

mercenary spirits that bind the creative impulse and usurp the innovator's ideas - struck a basic chord in the struggle for a new order. "Пусть млечный путь расколется на млечный путь изобретателей и млечный путь приобретателей", he declared in a statement that was to be adopted as a slogan of Iskusstvo kommuny.²⁸

By the spring of 1919, Khlebnikov had returned to Khar'kov, where he suffered considerable privations before departing for Baku in the autumn of 1920. Here he met up with Kruchenykh, but in May 1921 he moved on again, travelling as a cultural worker with the Red Army on its Persian expedition. He returned from there to Pyatigorsk, working as a nightwatchman and regaining his strength. Late in December 1921 he returned to Moscow, having the publication of his work as a primary goal, and with this in mind he turned to Mayakovskii for assistance.

Except for materials relating to Mayakovskii's attempts to publish Khlebnikov's work, there is little information which throws any light on relations between the two poets. In 1919 Mayakovskii

28. This slogan was taken from the manifesto "Truba marsian" written by Khlebnikov ^{while in Khar'kov in 1916} and signed by his young associates of the 'Liren' group, which included Aseev.

had tried to publish Khlebnikov's works in IMO, and even paid him an advance.²⁹

Mayakovskii's efforts had been in vain. In a letter written early in 1920 while recovering from typhus, Khlebnikov did not conceal his fears from Brik as to the fate of this edition.³⁰ In frustration, Khlebnikov accepted help from Mariengof and Esenin, at that moment passing through Khar'kov on a tour. From a second letter to Brik, however,³¹ it appears that, ignorant of the closure of IMO, he still clung to the hope that his futurist friends would eventually be able to realise their plans. On returning to Moscow in the late autumn of 1921 and rejoining the circle around Mayakovskii, Khlebnikov's spirits rose and with them confidence of eventual success.

"We are organising a publishing house",

29. Khlebnikov received two advances, of 400 and 750 rubles, from IMO in March and April 1919.

Mayakovskii recalled: "Three years ago I managed with enormous difficulty to arrange for the publication of his manuscripts, with payment. The day before he was due to receive his money, I met him crossing Theatre Square carrying a little suitcase.

'Where are you off to?' - 'The south, spring is is here!' ... and off he went. XII, 270

30. See V.V. Khlebnikov, Neizdannye proizvedeniya, p. 384. In this letter Khlebnikov also requested additional funds from IMO.

31. *ibid.*

he wrote to the artist Miturich in February 1922, "Kamenskii has published Moi zhurnal, Aseev will soon be here. I am issuing the Vestnik Velimira Khlebnikova".³² Clearly the publishing house Khlebnikov referred to was MAF, which had plans to issue the unrealised 1919 edition. By April he was expressing his anxiety as to the lack of progress,³³ and indeed the book failed to materialise, as did a projected edition of the utopian epic "Ladomir".³⁴

32. V.V. Khlebnikov, Sobranie proizvedenii, Vol. V, p. 325. Though Miturich was not at this stage personally acquainted with Khlebnikov, he later assisted the poet in the publication of "Zangezi" and "Doski sud'by" and was with the poet during his last illness. According to the notes in this volume, two numbers of the Vestnik appeared, containing Khlebnikov's decrees and mathematical calculations.

33. In a letter to his mother. Ibid.

34. Kruchenykh advertised "Ladomir" as "being printed by MAF" in Apokalipsis russkoi literatury. According to Mayakovskii it was submitted to Giz (Gosizdat), XII, 27. According to Stepanov, Khlebnikov handed over several poems to Mayakovskii for publication and some to Esenin. Unfortunately Stepanov's list of which works went to whom is spoiled by a misnumbering of footnotes, so that it is difficult to tell which works were given to Mayakovskii and which to Esenin. "Nasledie Velemira Khlebnikova", N. Stepanov, Na literaturnom postu, Moscow, 1927, No. 22-23, p. 85. Of Khlebnikov's post-revolutionary works, Mayakovskii claimed to know only "Ladomir", "Tsarapina po nebu" and the poems on the Volga famine. XII, 27.

At first, relations between Khlebnikov and Mayakovskii, Kamenskii, Kruchenykh and Aseev appear to have been cordial. Khlebnikov wrote poems in honour of Kruchenykh and Mayakovskii which give no hint of estrangement -

Во-Во Маяковский! - я и ты!

Нас, - как сказать по советски,

взмолвить вместе в одном барахле,

...

Будем гордиться вдвоем

Строгой ^{то} звука судьбой. 35

But Mayakovskii's failure to publish his works distressed Khlebnikov greatly and they became estranged.³⁶ Mayakovskii blamed Khlebnikov's nervous and exhausted state. "Illness made Khlebnikov demanding", he wrote, "Khlebnikov became suspicious if people did not give him all their attention". (XII, 28) In May, accompanied by Miturich, Khlebnikov left Moscow intending to recuperate in the countryside before returning to his family in Astrakhan, but died on June 28th after terrible sufferings and in miserable surroundings near Novgorod.

35. V.V. Khlebnikov, Sobranie proizvedenii, Vol.III, p.293.

36. See memoir of S.Spasskii, with whom Khlebnikov shared a room in the VKhUTEMAS building, in W. Woronzylski, op. cit., p. 294.

The poet's death reinforced the legend. In the months that followed, respectful obituaries appeared in the periodical press, some of which, such as Gorodetskii's obituary in Izvestiya or an article by Vel in Kniga i revolyutsiya, sought to reassess the place of Khlebnikov in the cubo-futurist movement or even deny him to it. Vel asserted that a qualitative difference existed between cubo-futurist urbanism and Khlebnikov's slavophile 'budetlyanstvo' that rendered the two incompatible:

'Budetlyanstvo' is not futurism; while the latter denies tradition completely, 'budetlyanstvo' is the creation of the new, nourished by the marvellous traditions of Russian antiquity.³⁷

At a less dignified level, Mariengof sought to claim Khlebnikov for imaginism, insulting Mayakovskii and Khlebnikov into the bargain.³⁸ The attempt to separate Khlebnikov from cubo-futurism, enshrined in Tynyanov's introduction to the Sobranie proizvedenii, anticipated the strenuous efforts on the part of Soviet scholarship to do the same with regard to Mayakovskii. Shklovskii, referring to Tynyanov directly, denounced such a tendency as "theoretically reactionary work, a minus for Khlebnikov".³⁹

37. Vel, "Khlebnikov - osnovatel'budetlyan", Kniga i revolyutsiya, Petrograd, 1922, No.9-10(21-22) p.25.

38. A. Mariengof, "Velemir Khlebnikov", Ermitazh, Moscow, 1922, No.9, p.5.

39. V.B. Shklovskii, "Pod znakom razdelitel'nym", Novyi lef, Moscow, 1928, No.11, p. 44.

The historical fact of a common cause and mutual influences remains, and, as Markov observed, if "there seems little doubt that Khlebnikov, both as a poet and as a poetic personality, outgrew the narrow frames of Gileyan futurism in any of its versions", then this, "instead of altering the concept of Khlebnikov's position, simply widens and deepens the concept of futurism".⁴⁰

In the face of early manifestations of such a tendency, as well as a good deal of malicious gossip, Mayakovskii made his own position clear:

In order to preserve a correct literary perspective I consider it my duty to state categorically on my behalf and, no doubt, on behalf of my friends, the poets Aseev, Burlyuk, Kruchenykh, Kamenskii, Pasternak, that we considered him and consider him one of our poetic teachers and the finest, most honourable knight in our poetic struggle. (XII, 28.)

Mayakovskii's use of both the past and present tense was apposite, for Khlebnikov's poetic influence was far from historic. His work on the regeneration of poetic language continued to hold the imagination and command the respect of his friends. Yet Mayakovskii ended his obituary on a curious note, for, infuriated by the rush of praise for Khlebnikov who had been so neglected while alive, he declared "Stop ... this veneration with posthumous editions. Articles on the living! Bread for the living! Paper for the living!" (XII, 28.)

40. V. Markov, The Longer Poems of Velimir Khlebnikov, p. 12.

Despite this, Mayakovskii gave considerable space in LEF to the publication of Khlebnikov's verse, while members of the LEF group, Kruchenykh, Aseev, Vinokur, Sillov and Petrovskii preserved and collected his verse for publication.

Obituary notices began to appear on futurism too. In December 1921 Aksenov, one of Meierkhol'd's collaborators, pronounced futurism dead,⁴¹ as did Bryusov at the end of 1922 in a review of five years of soviet poetry. According to Bryusov, futurism, the movement which had proved so influential on the younger poets of all tendencies, had fulfilled its role in literature and must now succumb to the fate of all literary schools.⁴² Yet LEF, which began to appear only a few months after Bryusov's article appeared, strenuously sought to avoid that grim logic. Futurism was not dead, could not be dead, since it represented a dynamic, free movement ceaselessly evolving in step with the revolution.

The return of the cubo-futurists coincided with the organisation of MAF, Mayakovskii's second major attempt to establish a publishing house to serve the needs of the group. The political, cultural and economic background to the history of MAF is complex, involving adjustments in Party policy in literature and inter-group rivalries, but extremely revealing

41. I. Aksenov, "K likvidatsii futurizma", Pechat' i revolyutsiya, Moscow, 1921, No. 3. p. 98.

42. V. Bryusov, "Vchera, segodnya i zavtra russkoi poezii", Pechat i revolyutsiya, Moscow, 1922, No. 7, pp. 66-67.

with regard to the practical motivation for Mayakovskii's organisational efforts on behalf of the group.

Since the closure of IMO Mayakovskii had encountered considerable difficulty in publishing his work. The primary reason was the official discrediting of futurism and Lenin's pressure on Gosizdat, but with an acute paper shortage affecting all forms of publishing activity, belles lettres occupied a low position in Gosizdat's priorities.⁴³ The publication of two major new periodicals, Krasnaya nov' and Pechat' i revolyutsiya, which began to appear in the middle of 1921, did not immediately alleviate the situation for either Mayakovskii or his colleagues. Early in 1921 Voronskii, an old bolshevik journalist, was appointed editor of the first 'fat' Soviet literary journal Krasnaya nov', and charged with providing a platform for pro-Soviet writers of both the older and younger generations, and of all artistic tendencies. This initiative came from the highest level. Lenin took an active interest in the journal, and his wife, Krupskaya, together with Gor'kii joined the editorial board. The editorial policy of Krasnaya nov' following Party policy, deliberately spurned artistic sectarianism, but, reflecting the Party policy of a living link with tradition, inevitably set its face against the strident demands of the 'left'.

43. According to E.A. Dinershtein, during the period January to August 1921, Gosizdat decided to publish only 18 belles lettres titles. E.A. Dinershtein, "Izdatel'ikaya deyatel'nost' V.V. Mayakovskogo", op. cit. p. 163.

Lunacharskii set the tone in the first issue:

I think personally that the road from the art of the past to proletarian, socialist art does not lead via Futurism, and if this art is enriched, even if only technically, by some or other of Futurism's discoveries, then probably not to any serious extent. But this is my personal opinion, which is probably shared by a great many other communists.⁴⁴

Reviewers and commentators in Pechat' i revolyutsiya, a 'journal of criticism and bibliography' edited by that vocal opponent of the 'left' - Vyacheslav Polonskii, also followed a critical line.

Mayakovskii, therefore, sought an alternative means of publishing the books of the members of his group, but was unwilling to use private publishers for political reasons. Imitating the practice of Gosizdat, he tried to arrange the printing of books abroad and their import into the R S F S R and managed to find a willing publisher in Riga, no doubt through the efforts of Lilya Brik, who was staying there at the time. In view of his recent skirmish with Gosizdat, Mayakovskii doubted whether that body would permit the import of futurist publications,⁴⁵ but his fears proved groundless. Following a government decree of

44. A.V. Lunacharskii, "Nashi zadachi v oblasti khudozhestvennoi literatury", Sobranie Sochinenii Vol. VII, p. 248.

45. Letter to Lilya Brik of 22nd November, 1921, quoted by Dinershtein, op. cit., p. 168.

28th November, 1921, effectively recognising the work of private publishers, Meshcheryakov, chief editor of Gosizdat, expressly encouraged the private publication of belles lettres and other literature as "a very useful supplement to its (Gosizdat's - F.W.) work".⁴⁶

On the very day a government decree lifted restrictions on private imports, Mayakovskii and Brik announced their plans for MAF, a venture that would produce "a journal, anthologies, monographs, collected works, text books etc., dedicated to the propoganda of the basis of future communist art and the demonstration of what has been done on this path". (XIII, 203.) When they requested permission for the import of its publications, Lunacharskii gave his immediate approval and enlisted the co-operation of Gosizdat. Brik and Mayakovskii included with the application a list of intended publications, not so very different in character from that of IMO:

1. MAF. Illustrated journal of the arts. Editors - V. Mayakovskii and O. Brik. Collaborators - Aseev, Arvatov, Kushner, Pasternak, Chuzhak and others.
2. Mayakovskii. Collections of verse.
3. B. Pasternak. Lirika.
4. Book on the Russian poster.
5. Poetika (collection of articles on the theory of poetic language).

46. *ibid.*, p. 163.

6. Khlebnikov. Works.

7. Art in Production. Collection of articles.

8. Anthology of latest literature. (XIII, 53)

These particular plans came to nothing, both because of financial complications and because the Riga capitalist came to realise the sort of people he was dealing with.⁴⁷

These difficulties were resolved by a new turn in Party policy and the issuing of Party directives designed to encourage pro-Soviet literary tendencies in order to counter the flow of hostile literature released by the relaxation of controls over publishing. Voronskii sounded the alarm at a special conference of the AgitotdelTsK RKP(b) held to discuss the problem in February 1922:

Groups which are close to us, for example Bobrov's group, the 'Serapion brotherhood' etc., are not supported by us and as a result their publications wither ... While petty-bourgeois, philistine literature blossoms luxuriantly, those writers close to us must be brought together, because

47. Mayakovskii did, however, publish several books with pro-Soviet publishers in Germany, including the celebrated Mayakovskii dlya golosa, illustrated and designed by Lisitskii. Mayakovskii also turned, at the end of 1921, to a private publisher in the R S F S R - Kozhebatkin, to publish a collection entitled Lirika. See E.A. Dinershtein, "Mayakovskii v 'Kruge' i 'Krasnoi novi'", in Z. Papernyi (ed), Mayakovskii i sovetskaya literatura, Moscow, 1964, p. 407.

by that means alone can we conduct the ideological struggle in the book market.⁴⁸

The Agitotdel, taking its cue from Voronskii's statement resolved that practical measures, through the agency of Gosizdat, should be undertaken to support all groups that were not obviously anti-Soviet, and named these groups as the proletarian writers, the 'Serapion brothers' (on condition that they ceased to co-operate with "reactionary" publishers), Bobrov's group, Mayakovskii's group, and, interestingly, the emigre 'Smena vekh' group which included A. Tolstoi and other political waverers of the older generation. Only a few days later this recommendation was approved by the Orgbyuro TsK RKP(b).

In the space of just over a year, therefore, Party policy towards the futurists had swung from outright rejection to qualified support; a change reinforced by Lenin's praise of "Prozasedavshiesya".

48. A.K. Voronskii, ^{as} quoted from archive material by Dinershtein, "Izdatel'skaya deyatel'nost' V.V. Mayakovskogo", op. cit., p. 164. In a footnote Dinershtein asserts that the writers grouped around Bobrov's "Tsentrifuga" publishing house included I. Aksenov, Aseev, Bol'shakov, Loks, Pasternak, Khlebnikov and others. ibid. According to Markov, however, "Though books bearing the Centrifuge imprint continued to appear until 1920, the group itself seems to have ceased to exist around the end of 1917". V. Markov, Russian Futurism, p. 275.

In the "Pis'mo TsK o Proletkul'takh", the Party had attacked 'left' art as a whole, and Mayakovskii was inevitably included in the condemnation. The decision of the Orgbyuro in specifically identifying 'Mayakovskii's group', which had proved its political loyalty beyond doubt, showed a greater ability to distinguish between various factions on the 'left'. But this new recognition of services rendered still did not imply approval for the artistic programme of Mayakovskii's group.

The Party's decision to offer support alleviated Mayakovskii's difficulties immediately. Guaranteed a subsidy from Gosizdat, he entered into an arrangement with the print shop of VKhUTEMAS for the publication of MAF books. By April Mayakovskii's long poem Lyublyu and Aseev's collection Stal'noi solovei had appeared as Nos. 1 and 2 in the MAF 'Seriya poetov'. In May a second edition of Lyublyu appeared in Riga during Mayakovskii's visit there, but was confiscated by the police.⁴⁹ Production quality was low,

49. According to a note in "Lyublyu" in Vol. IV of the P.S.S., two editions of the poem were published by the Jewish workers' publishing house 'Arbeiterheim', one of which was confiscated. According to Dinershtein this edition, also published as No. 1 of the 'seriya poetov', is evidence of the fact that MAF was not in fact a publishing house, but simply "a series of books of one creative tendency, the authors of which were united by the community of their aesthetic interests". The real publisher was the Production Bureau of VKhUTEMAS, which had no list of its own but relied on outside orders.

but VKhUTEMAS, as a stronghold of the 'left', provided congenial conditions with no editorial interference.⁵⁰ The arrangement was mutually beneficial, for Mayakovskii could now call on financial support from Gosizdat for the VKhUTEMAS print shop.

The publishing plans for MAF remained unrealised, and, with the exception of Stal'noi solovei, Mayakovskii succeeded in publishing only his own work. During May and June two editions of his collection of topical satirical verse, Mayakovskii izdevaetsya, and a third edition of Lyublyu appeared in the MAF 'seriya poetov'. From then on he ran into difficulties. The Production Bureau of VKhUTEMAS broke two deadlines for the publication of a 4-volume collected works. This edition did eventually appear as the two-volume 13 let raboty, but not before Mayakovskii, irritated with VKhUTEMAS inefficiency, had annulled his agreement with the Production Bureau.⁵¹

50. The head of the Production Bureau, E.V. Ravdel, had worked with Mayakovskii on the production of "Misteriya-buff" for the III Congress of the Comintern.

51. Volume 2 appeared at the beginning of October 1922. At the same time he sent the proofs of Vol. 1, which included "Ya sam", to Chuzhak in Chita. Chuzhak published "Ya sam" in Dal'nevostochnyi telegraf of the 11th November, 1922. Chuzhak must have been one of the last of the 'Tvorchestvo' group to leave Chita. Vol. 1 did not appear until early February 1923.

Some interesting works were thus left unpublished. Besides the MAF projects Dinershtein lists other works accepted for publication by VKhUTEMAS; four books of Pasternak's verse, a collection of Bol'shakov, Mysli ob iskusstve by Arvatov, I. Aksenov's translation of Crommelynck's Le cocu magnifique, which with the Russian title Velikodushnyi rogonosets was one of Meierkhol'd's major post-revolutionary productions, and Kruchenykh's Revolyutsiya i yazyk. Kruchenykh, indefatigable self-publisher, was the only one with sufficient initiative to break through the impasse, and become by default the theoretician of MAF, publishing three books - Faktura slova, Sdvigologiya and Apokalipsis v russkoi literature - in the 'Seriya Teorii'.⁵² It was zaum' therefore, that formed the artistic programme of MAF rather than the productivism of Arvatov, Brik and Kushner.⁵³

The intention behind the deliberations of the Agitotdel in February 1922 had been to foster solidarity amongst pro-soviet writers and break down inter-group rivalries. Thus a second important consequence of the Orgbyuro decree was the opening up of the journals Kraznaya nov' and Pechat i revolyutsiya to

52. Kruchenykh used the print shop of Gastev's TsIT to print these works.

53. Kruchenykh advertised Komfut by Kushner, Proizvodstvennoe iskusstvo by Brik and Marks i iskusstvo by Arvatov.

Mayakovskii and his associates. Mayakovskii and Aseev began to contribute poetry and critical articles to Krasnaya nov', while Arvatov and Aseev made several contributions to Pechat' i revolyutsiya. Organisational measures, too, were undertaken, and in July 1922 the Politbyuro TsK RKP(b) formed a "Commission for the Organisation of Writers and Poets into an Independent Society", with the participation of Voronskii and the members of the Gosizdat board. The Commission recommended the inclusion in the Society of those same groups which had been offered the support of Gosizdat, and also recommended that the organisation should be centred round a new publishing house - Krug - the responsibility for which was entrusted to Voronskii. Aseev's name figured prominently in the list of members of Krug's initiative group, and the list he drew up of suggested members opens with Mayakovskii's name. Both Aseev and Mayakovskii published books under the Krug imprint, though Mayakovskii did so only after the breakdown of his agreement with VKhUTEMAS.⁵⁴

54. Krug published three editions of Mayakovskii's verse, including Solntse, an edition remarkable for the non-objectivist illustrations by Larionov commissioned by Mayakovskii during his visit to Paris at the end of 1922.

However, the divisions between the literary factions, far from being smoothed over, in fact became more acute. Besides the differences in aesthetic opinion between the artistically conservative proletarian writers and the radical 'left', and the political rift between them and the 'Serapion brothers', Voronskii stood for a literary programme and aesthetic principles diametrically opposed to those of both Mayakovskii and the proletarians. Firstly, Voronskii followed Trotskii in denying the possibility of creating specifically proletarian art, in itself a provocative enough position to the proletarian writers. He further believed that the writer or artist could not escape his class origins, that the social psychology of the writer's class left an indelible imprint on his work, which directly contradicted the theory of the 'social command'.

Voronskii also believed in the cognitive function of art; a cardinal sin in the eyes of the 'left'. "Towards the autumn of 1922", Brik recalled, "there began to mature in the depths of Soviet literature the conflict which provoked lengthy literary debate, organisational regroupings, fierce polemics, and which was only resolved in June 1925 in the celebrated resolution of the TsK RKP(b) 'O politike partii v oblasti khudozhestvennoi literatury'.⁵⁵

55. O.M. Brik, "Mayakovskii - redaktor i organizator", op. cit., p. 127.

158 Voronskii also caused a good deal of resentment by his efforts to bring together the political waverers of the older generation, the 'smena vekh' group, and the new young writers without any strong political commitment - the so-called 'fellow travellers'. In view of the contempt for the first group expressed in the LEF manifestoes, the wooing of their support no doubt dismayed Mayakovskii, though he could hardly have been aware that Voronskii acted only at the Party's bidding.⁵⁶ While Voronskii acknowledged and published both the proletarians and the 'left', these groups nevertheless felt that he made too many concessions to the uncommitted. Brik recalled:

The apolitical position of Krasnaya nov' satisfied neither Mayakovskii nor the 'October' group. They accused Voronskii of falling excessively under the influence of these he 'attracted', and instead of reforming them he himself was reformed in their direction.⁵⁷

This conflict ultimately led to the tactical alliance between LEF and RAPP, concluded in the autumn of 1923; an alliance directed against Voronskii and which resulted in a boycott of all publications and organisations headed by him until June 1925. More immediately it led to the establishing of LEF.

The party was not the only body to seek to bring about unity, though other efforts were deliberately

56. See E.A. Dinershtein, "Mayakovskii v 'Kruge'; 'Krasnoi nove'", p.413.

57. O.M. Brik. "Mayakovskii - redaktor i organizator", op. cit., p. 128.

sectarian. The 'left', too, felt keenly the need to organise its forces in literature, the visual arts and theatre. Bitterly disappointed over the loss of its power in the state institutions, the 'left' was in no way ready to bury the hatchet in the war against traditionalists, and saw in organisation a means of regaining lost ground.

In the summer of 1922, therefore, the theatre magazine, Ermitazh, announced 'the first All-Russian Conference of left groups and formations in art', to be held in September. The initiative came from a small theatre group, massovoe deistvo, brainchild of the constructivist theoretician Aleksei Gan and his obscure collaborator V. Zhemchuzhnyi. Organisation, Zhemchuzhnyi argued, was essential to recover ground lost to the 'right':

Earlier we seized all the new territory without any particular effort and we only had to fight individual blockheads we encountered in other departments. Now, when the squall of reaction on the offensive threatens to throw us from the positions we have won ... we must intensify the struggle not only in the institutions, but in the market place as well. In this struggle the one with the better organisation will win.⁵⁸

58. V. Zhemchuzhnyi, "Konferentsiya 'levykh'", Ermitazh, 1922, No. 12, np.

Groups from the whole range of the 'left' artistic spectrum were invited: Vitebsk, Petrograd and Smolensk Unovis groups; Moscow, Petrograd, Kiev and Khar'kov Komfut organisations; The First Working Group of Constructivists, including Rodchenko, Stepanova and Gan; the Moscow Proletkul't; INKhUK, VKhUTEMAS; OBMOKhU, including the Stenberg brothers and Medunetskii; Meierkhol'd's Gvytm; the studios of Foregger and Ferdinandov and the Kino-tekhnikum. Throughout the summer months Ermitazh carried manifestoes and declarations by various 'left' groups hoping to participate, not least from that most outrageous of fringe literary groups, the 'nichevoki'.⁵⁹ The talk was all of unification, yet the conference's organisers had other intentions. Arvatov, the only member of Mayakovskii's circle involved in this project, wanted to use the conference to promote a split. He tried his utmost to bring into the open the rift between the seriously intentioned political groups, in particular those following a productivist line, and the 'left' aesthetes. Such a tactic was deemed necessary to rid the politicised 'left' of the taint of artistic bohemianism, now undergoing a revival in the cafes frequented by Nepmen, or simply to stifle any further outbreaks of art for art's sake.⁶⁰

59. The nichevoki's declaration is such an extreme example of 'left' rhetoric, that it must be a parody.

Ermitazh, 1922, No. 15.

60. In the summer and autumn Arvatov frequently contributed to Ermitazh and its successor Zrelishcha, writing articles with such dramatic titles as "Da zdravstvuet raskol - ugolovshchina i erotizm". Zrelishcha, 1922, No. 2

The conference, not surprisingly, did not take place, the 'left' proving, not for the last time, that it was totally incapable of organising itself on a common platform. The only practical effort towards unification was an amalgamation of Meierkhol'd's theatre workshop with the studios of Ferdinandov and Foregger. The union was short-lived, but there was one positive result from this theatrical mis-match - its name, 'Left Front'.

EPILOGUE

At the time the fruitless discussions on the unification of the 'left' were taking place - fruitless largely because the productivists saw the proposed conference as a means of dissociating themselves from the apolitical elements of the 'left' - Mayakovskii and Brik were on a tour of Germany and France. Returning to Moscow, they took up the term Left Front for a new venture to replace MAF. On the basis of the policy decisions of the Orgbyuro TsK announced early in 1922, they applied in January 1923 to the Agitotdel TsK for assistance in publishing a new journal representing the "extreme revolutionary tendencies in art" (XIII, 204) to be called LEF. In contrast to the difficulties Mayakovskii had experienced in his earlier dealings with the state publishing authorities, this new venture was launched with astonishing speed. By the end of March the first issue of LEF had been delivered by Gosizdat to the newsstands. This first issue led with three shrill manifestoes written by Mayakovskii, and contained poems by Mayakovskii, the cubo-futurists and Pasternak; illustrations of work by the constructivists; articles on the revolutionary role of futurism and formalism by Tret'yakov and Brik respectively; and a long leading article by Chuzhak with the resounding title "Under the Banner of Life-Building" ("Pod znakom zhiznestroeniya").

4?

The plans of Mayakovskii and his fellow editors, Arvatov, Aseev, Brik, Chuzhak, Kushner and Tret'yakov were ambitious; LEF was to "act as the avant-garde for Russian and world art".(XIII, 204) Though now oriented towards marxism, LEF stressed its continuity from cubo-futurism, refusing to abandon its hostility to the realist tradition and stressing continual formal experiment. Yet the new insistence on utilitarianism in its turn required the rejection of such experiment conducted for its own sake. In practical terms, the zaum' experiments of Kruchenykh, say, when applied to the tasks of creating effective agitational works, were permissible; the purely abstract sculptures of Gabo or Pevsner, for example, were not. In the curious phraseology Mayakovskii used in his application to the Agitotdel, LEF, it was promised, would "struggle against decadence, against aesthetic mysticism, against self-sufficient formalism, against indifferent naturalism for the affirmation of tendentious realism based on the use of the technical devices of all revolutionary artistic schools".(XIII, 204)

The editorial board intended that the magazine should serve as a banner rallying the Left Front in general, while also serving as the mouthpiece for such 'left' organisations as OPOYAZ (Petrograd and Moscow groups), INKhUK, Meierkhol'd's GITIS
[n] (Gosudarstvennyi istitut teatral'nogo iskusstva), the artistic council of the Moscow Proletkul't,

which with the adoption of productivism by Arvatov had gone over almost entirely to the 'left', MAF and VKhUTEMAS. These of course were the organisations where Mayakovskii and his closest colleagues worked, and it was they who provided the magazine's regular contributions. So it is not surprising that some potential supporters of the magazine felt confused as to whom the magazine was supposed to represent. Tret'yakov was forced to explain in the third issue.

The LEF collective does not by any means encompass everything under the name of Left Front ... LEF is the responsible coalition of those seven people who comprise the editorial board. LEF has the aim of uniting all the scattered forces of the Left Front, but answers as a whole only for the members of the editorial board.¹

From the very first Mayakovskii had set his face against the idea of a formal organisation of the 'left' along the lines of the burgeoning proletarian organisations VAPP (Vserossiiskaya assotsiyatsiya proletarskikh pisatelei) and its Moscow affiliate MAPP with their central ideological organs such as Na postu. He preferred an informal association of artists bound by a common understanding of art and its tasks, within which divergent viewpoints could be debated

1. S.M. Tret'yakov, "Tribuna Lefa", LEF, 1923, No.3. p. 164.

and accommodated. The editorial board of LEF represented just such a coalition, with Aseev and Mayakovskii privately sceptical of the extreme calls for the destruction of art mounted by Brik, Tret'yakov and Chuzhak.

Chuzhak was to challenge Mayakovskii at every opportunity on the issue of organisation. He insisted on adding a rider to the manifestoes published in LEF No. 1 to the effect that only a disciplined organisation, "a single cultural communist Party",² could hope to win the battle for the future of art in the USSR.

Far from achieving a common platform, Brik was to note later, "a combination was achieved of groups that were totally disparate and in part even implacably hostile in their principles".³ There was an enormous discrepancy between the pronouncements of those like Tret'yakov who called for an end to imaginative literature and the transfer of literary activities to reportage ('literatura fakta'), or like Brik who called for a transfer "From the picture to the calico print"⁴, and the publication of the verse of Kruchenykh, Kamenskii, Khlebnikov, Pasternak and Mayakovskii himself.

2. LEF, 1923, No.1, p.7.

3. O.M. Brik, "Mayakovskii - redaktor i organizator", op. cit., p. 135.

4. Title of an article by Brik in LEF, 1924, No. 2(6).

If the lyric was dead, according to the lights of Leftist theory, critics such as Chuzhak were to ask, then what were such poems as Mayakovskii's "Pro eto" or Pasternak's "V^ysokaya bolezn'" doing in a journal which supposedly endorsed such a theory? Equally, though the formalist scholars of OPOYAZ were to turn their analytical techniques to bear on Lenin's speech habits, there was little in common between them and those like Arvatov who sought to use formalist techniques as a whip to beat the formally less sophisticated opposition, or between them and Brik who turned the concept of literature as a device to the service of his concept of the 'social command'.

That most militant productivist Chuzhak was to turn away from LEF, announcing his departure from the editorial board in the fourth issue of the magazine. Ostensibly it was for reasons connected with the continuing dispute over the question of organisation, though he was also sorely tried by what he felt to be Mayakovskii's lack of progress along the path of development he considered essential. In Chuzhak's eyes, "Pro eto" with its foundation in the 'personal and petty', as also the agitational verse of the LEF poets in general, was but a continuation of old futurist habits. As he put it, "a dead system of habitualised devices holds back the living philosophy of budetlyanstvo".⁵

5. N.F. Chuzhak, "Plyusy i minusy", LEF, 1923, No. 3, p.32.

Art, Chuzhak demanded, must participate in shaping social development, not blindly reflect events and social pressures:

Above all, art that accompanies real life is completely inadequate. Art as accompaniment, even the most revolutionary, is as nothing before the task of the most active merging with the process of production ... Futurism which does not daily build a bridge into the burgeoning future, in conformity with the demands of the day, is useless for anyone, except 'revolutionary' philistines.⁶

Chuzhak was to confront Mayakovskii personally with his accusations at the First Conference of the Workers of the Left Front held in January 1925. This was another, and final attempt, to form a mass organisation of the 'left', but it too succeeded only in showing that the avant-garde, unlike the proletarians, were organically unsuited to organisational discipline. It also served to illustrate the enormous gap between Mayakovskii and the LEF poets on the one hand, and a younger generation of artists who embraced the more extreme tenets of productivism on the other. At this conference Mayakovskii was described by this younger generation almost in terms of a literary greybeard thwarting the healthy development of his children.⁷

6. N.F. Chuzhak, "K zadacham dnya", LEF, 1923, No.2, p.152.

7. See V.O. Pertsov's account of the conference from the younger generation's point of view in Za novoe iskusstvo, Moscow, 1925.

LEF's critics, and there was no shortage of them, seized on such obvious conflicts as these. Reactions ranged from vituperative spleen to kindly paternalism, but there could be no doubt as to the general concensus amongst Party spokesmen. LEF theory could in no wise lay claim to the title of a marxist aesthetic. Nor could there be any doubt that LEF's creative practice was totally unacceptable as a model for socialist art. The cry raised by Lunacharskii-Back to Ostrovskii! Back to the Peredvizhniki!- left no room for doubt that a comfortable literal realism was more suitable for the cultural growth of the working masses. "We do not and will never recognise", wrote one veteran bolshevik critic "the rebellion against the realism of Plekhanov in favour of the realism of Tatlin, because we do not wish to lose our common sense to please ape-like grimaces and affectation".⁸ It was in defence of Plekhanov's aesthetics that Voronskii, editor of Krasnaya nov', produced the formula of 'art as cognition' ('iskusstvo kak poznanie') when confronted with Chuzhak's slogan of 'art as life-building' ('iskusstvo kak zhiznestroenie').

Perhaps the fiercest polemics came with the proletarian organisations, anxious to demonstrate that LEF's claim to the title of revolutionary was fraudulent.

8. V. Polyanskii, "O levom fronte v iskusstve", Pod znamenem marksizma, 1923, No. 4-5, p.199.

Seeking to establish themselves as the Party's instrument in literature, they condemned LEF's experimentalism. Proletarian art was to grow out of the great Russian realist tradition. They demanded psychological realism, a portrait of the 'living man'. As far as the relationship between form and content was concerned, content determined form, and theoreticians should concern themselves with the sociological analysis of content in a work of literature.

Hose

The debate between the Left Front and the proletarians was about means rather than ends, however. Proletarian manifestoes described literature in terms close to that^{of} of the productivists⁹ - as an active force in the shaping of the individual and of society. Both proletarians and productivists shared, in fact, Bogdanov's heresy. Both, after all, had common roots in the Proletkul't movement. This identity of ends meant that in 1924 both sides could decide to sink their differences on questions of aesthetics in order to campaign against Voronskii as author of the concept of 'art as cognition' and as the patron of the apolitical 'fellow-travellers'.

The Party intervened in the feuding with its declaration of literary policy in 1925, in which it stated flatly that the Party could not give its wholehearted support to any one literary faction. The Party

9. See the manifesto of the Oktabr'^y group in Na postu, 1923, No.1.

had not yet made up its mind.¹⁰ LEF might not have been written off completely, particularly since many marxist critics felt that its poets gave grounds for optimism, but with resounding condemnations of the Left Front theoretical positions from Lunacharskii and such political heavyweights as Lenin and Trotskii, there could, however, be little hope of acceptance as a significant force in the evolution of a socialist aesthetic.

In 1925, when LEF folded with the seventh issue, Mayakovskii could reflect that his magazine had also failed in the effort to appeal for support over the heads of the leadership to creative youth. In simple commercial terms, LEF was never financially self-supporting. Nearly half the copies of the fourth issue of the magazine lay unsold in the Gosizdat warehouses, while books issued under the LEF imprint, such as Mayakovskii's "Pro eto" or Brik's short story "Ne poputchitsa", had failed to make much impact on the reading public. There were dark hints from supporters of the magazine of sabotage in the corridors of Gosizdat, or more realistically that Gosizdat had simply shown itself unwilling to undertake effective distribution. With Mayakovskii abroad throughout the summer of 1924, there was no-one on the magazine's editorial board to goad Gosizdat into action.

10. See "On the Policy of the Party in the Field of Belles-Lettres: Resolution of the TsK RKP(b)" in E.J. Brown, The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature, New York, 1971, p.239.

Brik, writing on the demise of LEF, referred to reasons other than simple commercial failure. "The magazine", he observed, "was disintegrating from within, with some parts standing in ever sharper contradiction to others. The foreground was occupied by energetic and noisy, albeit predominantly false, artistic programmes, exaggerated polemics on purely artistic questions and so on, thus pushing into the background what was of greatest value in the magazine - the works of the writers, first and foremost the works of Mayakovskii. As a result there arose what seems at first sight a paradoxical situation: the more the mass of readers came to love the work of Mayakovskii, the less interest they had in the magazine he edited".¹¹

"Picture to yourself a poet", Shklovskii was to write. "He stands at the head of a magazine, while that magazine is against poetry".¹² Shklovskii's is perhaps the neatest of the many formulations concerning the contradictions of LEF. Mayakovskii was to puzzle over this same question in verse, in the poem "Yubileinoe":

11. O.M. Brik, "Mayakovskii - redaktor i organizator", p. 140.

12. V.B. Shklovskii, "O Mayakovskom", Zhili-byli, p. 387.

Нами

лирика

в штыки

неоднократно атакована,

ищем речи

точной

и нагой.

Но поэзия -

пресволоочнейшая штуковина:

существует -

и ни в зуб ногой. (VI,49)

Theory ran wild, theory which put the creative imagination secondary to craft - journalism, political agitation and, in the visual arts, industrial design. Much of it today, when the heat of debate has long since cooled and the passions of the young artists long ago stifled in the grey cynicism of the Stalin era, seems extraordinarily over-simplified. The calls for social utilitarianism in conformity with the goals laid down by the RKP(b) may also give the impression of a movement which dug its own grave, often, as in the case of Tret'yakov, in a tragically literal sense.

Left Front theory pales in comparison with the tragic grandeur of LEF's poetry. Three undoubted masterpieces appeared in the seven issues of the magazine - Mayakovskii's "Pro eto", Pasternak's "Vysokaya bolezni'" and Khlebnikov's "Ladomir",

while Soviet critics would add a fourth - Mayakovskii's "Vladimir Il'ich Lenin". LEF may also claim credit for being the first Moscow publication to print Babel's stories.

u To simply oppose theory to practice is to distort, however. The principal problem facing the writers, artists and theoreticians was how to move from the heroic phase of participating in the victory of the revolution to the much more difficult task of participating directly in the socialist reconstruction of Russia. The artist had to be engaged. During the Civil War service to the revolution by means of political agitation, using such media as posters, 'agitki', film and so on, media which the 'left' artists were uniquely qualified to execute effectively, had been comparatively straightforward. Expressive resources were channelled into tackling specific problems. But where was the artist to go in NEP? How was the artist to make his contribution, and whither should experiment, the sine qua non of the 'left', be directed?

Left Front theorists demanded a further breaking down of the barriers between the artist and the community at large; the steady penetration of art into life. The artist should make his verbal or visual skills available to the masses - to drag, as Mayakovskii had put it, 'the republic out of the mud'. Left Front artists responded only too willingly.

Mayakovskii and Rodchenko formed a design partnership that turned out advertising posters in the constructivist manner, that were startlingly advanced in conception. The constructivists Stepanova and Popova worked on textile designs. Mayakovskii, after completing his last lyrical masterpiece "Pro eto", a poem born of intense personal unhappiness, plunged into writing topical political verse for newspapers. Tret'yakov spent much time and energy on formulating effective slogans, while also writing a documentary play about a disaster at a gas works. The play received its first performance in a Moscow gas plant, perhaps the furthest step on the road to taking the theatre out of the theatre. Agit-plays for working men's clubs, clothing and furniture design, architecture and photomontage, effective intertitles for silent films, the rhymed newspaper editorial, the political slogan - all this was frontal assault on 'byt'. Russia was to be pulled out of the mire of its backwardness, and the artist would ensure that the masses had the best possible means at hand to master their environment.

But the call for art into everyday life called into question the very existence of the artist. The idea of the artist as the outstanding, creatively gifted individual was redundant. Yet the best work in LEF, whether verse by the futurists or the essays

of the formalist scholars, was by precisely such individuals. It is obvious on looking through his writings after October 1917 that Mayakovskii made strenuous efforts to go at least part of the way. Ultimately, his suicide was to show at what cost he suppressed his lyric gift. Of all the members of Mayakovskii's group, it seems that Tret'yakov alone possessed the necessary qualities to make that sacrifice, to subordinate creative drive to the dour dictate of theory.

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The volume of material relating to Mayakovskii's life and work is vast. The amount of material by or about his comrades of the 'left' is only slightly less impressive. The following bibliography is confined, therefore, to a selective list of the books and periodicals consulted in the course of researching this thesis and quoted in it. I have referred, whenever possible, to readily available collected editions. Short review articles quoted in the text have generally been omitted.

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